

Worship Series: *Crushed*

Service Theme: *Self-Righteousness Is Crushed By Repentance*

Sermon Theme: Listen to What They Say (March 2, 2022)
Ash Wednesday—Luke 18:9-14

“You can tell a lot about a person just by listening to what they say.” I learned that from a professor in college, and it’s certainly true. If they have an accent, you can tell what part of the country or world they’re from. If they’re always excitedly talking about their kids, you can tell they’re a proud parent. If your spouse responds to all your questions with short Yups, Mmhms, and Oks, you can tell they’re probably upset about something. If your co-worker constantly talks about themselves, you can tell they’re probably conceited. Or, if they’re always asking questions to get to know you better, you can tell they genuinely care about you. You can tell a lot about a person by listening to what they say.

And tonight, we also want to **Listen to What They Say**. Because that’s true in Jesus’ parables too. You can tell a lot about the main point Jesus is trying to drive home to his audience just by listening to what the characters in Jesus’ parables say, and what Jesus himself says!

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector is probably one of the best known parables of Jesus. It’s the appointed Gospel for Ash Wednesday every year, and you’ve certainly heard it many other times too. Which means it can be easy to kind of gloss over it. “We know this one already!” But when you listen carefully to what they say, this parable can take on a new light.

First, listen to whom Luke says Jesus addressed this parable. ***“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.”*** Is that you? Before you

answer, consider some of the things that occur during the season of Lent. With those ashes on your forehead, you might be tempted to post a selfie on your social media, or stop at the store on your way home to make sure everyone sees those ashes and knows you’re one of the really good Christians. I’ve even seen churches offer “drive-thru” ashes, so even if you don’t want to actually take the time to worship and meditate on God’s Word on Ash Wednesday, you can still at least show off how dedicated you are.

Then there’s the tradition of “giving something up for Lent.” While it’s intended to remove distractions from our humble Lenten journey to Jesus’ cross, most people are quick to tell everyone what they’re giving up, so everyone can know just how dedicated they are.

Not to mention that during Lent, you can go to church not once, but twice each week! And during Holy Week, you can go three times! So many opportunities to show off just how dedicated you are!

Now, those certainly aren’t bad things. In fact, depending on how you think about them, they can all be very spiritually beneficial! But they can also become major temptations for self-righteousness. We have to honestly listen to what our hearts say about such actions. When we say, “Look at these ashes,” and “I gave up chocolate for Lent,” and “I’ve been to church 15 times in the last 40 days,” does it reflect a heart deeply in love with our Savior? Or hearts parroting the words of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable? ***“I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all I get.”***

To fully learn from what these characters say, it’s important to know the context. Two men who make their way to the Temple in Jerusalem, one is a Pharisee, the other, a Tax Collector. The Pharisees were considered the spiritual elites of Jewish society. And the Pharisees thought so too! Since they were almost manically obsessed with keeping the law—both God’s, and hundreds of laws they’d created themselves—they believed they were far more reverent and obedient than everyone else. Tax collectors, however, were considered the scum of Jewish society. The word “tax collector” was synonymous with thief, liar, or traitor.

So, Jesus sets up a major contrast for his audience. The highly praised, and the completely despised. Jesus obviously knew who people would assume would be the hero and the villain in his story. But, assumption isn't always reality. You can tell a lot about a person by listening to what they say!

The Pharisee stands up tall and prays, ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”*** What do we learn by listening to what he says? Notice what he focuses on in his prayer—if you could even call this a prayer. After the initial address to God, everything else is self-focused. There's no confession of sins; no reliant plea for God's grace or help. Basically, he recites his self-righteousness. What he says tells us what was in his heart. He thought he had nothing to repent of; that he was good enough; that he didn't need God.

And we see the fallout. Like the crowd Jesus addressed, the Pharisee looked down on everyone else—especially the tax collector who was also in the Temple that day. And that's expected, because self-righteousness always makes people feel morally superior. And moral superiority always leads to looking down on everyone else you see as morally inferior.

So again, I'll ask...is that you? “No way! Not me! I'm nothing like that self-righteous Pharisee who looks down on everyone else!” But I wonder how often we're far more like him than we'd admit. When you see a homeless person on the corner, do you think, “If you weren't an addict, or weren't so lazy and got a job, you wouldn't be in that position!” Or are you always griping about and pointing out all the ills of “kids these days” and the younger generations? Or do you look at the older generations and shake your head at how out of touch with reality they are? When you go out for breakfast after church, still in your Sunday best, do you feel superior to those wearing their sweats after just rolling out of bed on Sunday morning? Do you feel morally superior to Vladimir Putin and the Russians right now? How do you feel about this Pharisee whenever you hear this parable? What can we

learn about ourselves by what we say about the sins of others? “God, I thank you that I'm not like these other people, these sinners!”

Is there a little self-righteous judgmental Pharisee in our heart that blinds us to our own sin and unworthiness, and leads us to see ourselves as morally superior to those other “sinners”? Now, I'm not saying that which God calls sin is therefore excusable. The robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and tax collectors the Pharisee looked down on were also guilty of sin, just as those who disobey God's Word today are guilty of sin. But if we only talk about those who sin differently than us, but never address our own sinful hearts and actions, what does that say about us?

It tells us that on Ash Wednesday, and every day, we need to be more like the Tax Collector. With his head down, and a beating fist over his beating heart, with six simple Greek words he pleads, ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*** What do we learn by listening to what he says? He doesn't make excuses or point to good things he'd done. He doesn't point the finger at others or play the comparison game. What he says tells us that he fully understands who he is. In Greek, he doesn't just call himself “a” sinner, but “the sinner.” Instead of self-righteousness, he admits his complete lack of righteousness. Instead of looking down on others, he looks down, a sinner unable to raise his eyes toward a holy God.

Friends, listen to what they say. Listen to the reminder that was given as ash cross was drawn on your forehead. ***“You are dust. To dust you shall return.”*** Listen to what Paul says in Romans, ***“There is no difference. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Listen to Nathan's accusing words to David that also point the finger at our sin. ***“You are the man! You are the woman!”*** What they say tells us everything we need to know about ourselves. We have nothing to cling to in ourselves. Nothing we can do to wash away the sin stains on our hearts and hands.

Nothing to do but throw ourselves on God's mercy, crying out with humble, repentant hearts, “God, have mercy on me, the sinner.”

But the most important thing we can do is listen to what Jesus says. Because it tells us everything we need to know about him. ***“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”***

In a surprising reversal of expectations, Jesus says what we need to hear. We’re not saved by the things we do. We’re saved by grace. When we humbly, repentantly lay our sins at our Savior’s feet, we go home justified before God.

What “justified” means is key here. It’s a judicial word that means “to be declared not guilty.” Picture a courtroom. Everyone there knows the defendant is guilty. The evidence is undeniable, the defendant has even confessed he’s guilty. And so the judge pounds the gavel and says... guilty, right? No. He says, “Go home justified. I declare you not guilty.”

Listen to what Jesus says, and marvel at what it means. That guilty Tax Collector went home not guilty before God, while the self-righteous Pharisee doesn’t. How? Because God heard the tax collector’s repentant plea, and did have mercy on him.

The Greek word the Tax Collector says for “Have mercy” doesn’t mean, “feel bad for” or “take pity on me.” It literally means, ***“Make propitiation for me.”*** Propitiation means to offer the necessary sacrifice or payment by which forgiveness is accomplished. The Tax Collector wasn’t asking God to look

the other way at his sin and unworthiness, but to do what was necessary to be reconciled.

Listen to what Paul says. ***“Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** Our repentance doesn’t convince God to save us. Rather, by faith, we’re led to come to God in humble repentance because in God’s unfailing grace, he offered the necessary sacrifice for our sins—our Savior, Jesus. Dust and ashes though we are, though to dust we will return...go home tonight assured that you’re not guilty; Go home with your confidence for salvation in the right place—not in self-righteousness, but in Christ’s righteousness. Listen to what God says, because it tells us everything we need to know about him and us. ***“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”***