

Perfect Sinners

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. Also from me, a very warm welcome to Watermark. If you don't know me, my name is Niels. I'm part of the staff team. I'll be preaching in a moment. Yeah, it's really great to see you. Yeah, we're going to we can keep talking after the service. But yeah, let's sit down and continue. And this is the part where instead of speaking to God, we're going to focus on listening to God.

But so in a moment, Jasmine is going to come and read the scripture. And then I will try and explain that before we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. But yeah, as we want God to speak to us, why don't we pray together? So let's bow our heads and pray.

Father, thank you for your grace. And again, we always remember that we wouldn't be on speaking terms with you. And yet your love, you speak to us. You send your son to bring us to you. And now you speak to us in your love for your words. Please speak to each of our hearts today.

Many of us are in different places, but you know what each of us needs to hear. And so speak to us through your words and change us and lift our eyes to Jesus, to his grace and glory. In Jesus name we pray. Amen. Jasmine.

Amen. Amen.

[1 : 5 1] Amen.

changed. It's about the things that, uh, yeah, we don't want to change. Of course, we're going to move to a new venue, a new part of Hong Kong. Things are going to change and yet some things should not change. And, uh, this, what we're going to talk about today is one of those.

And, and together that's, well, what do you think is the most important thing in life? What's the most important thing in life? I don't know what you would say. I guess there are, uh, here in Hong Kong, a lot of people would think it's money or getting a job, uh, the right job, uh, for families, maybe your kids education. I think for many of us, well, the right spouse, right? That's the most important thing in life or just what people think of me making a difference.

I don't know what you would say, but let's wind the clock forward a bit, right? How about a hundred years from now? How about a thousand years from now, a million years from now? And then suddenly we know, all those things fade into the background and there's only one thing that really matters.

And that is, well, where do we stand with God, right? There's a God who, you know, who made us, who loves us. Uh, where do we stand with him? That will matter. That's, you know, we would be accepted by him because right now the world is kind of going as it is not very well, but, uh, the world is turning on. But one day the Bible says God will come and he will make everything right.

[4 : 16] And he will make a division between, you know, humanity will be in two groups of people. There will be those who are accepted by him and those who are not. And, and which group, well, are, will you be in and what makes each group? I think that's the question, right? That is what we need to be sure of this a hundred years from now. That's the only thing that matters. And of course, if this is so important, no wonder, you know, we want to make sure that we don't change that as we move. This is one of our, our fundamentals. And what would you say, you know, what would it, what would make you acceptable to God? How can we be in a relationship with him? That's the big question.

Well, um, that is what we're going to preach on today. And we're going to look at it from this famous parable. I think most of us, you know, notice, I mean, most of us have heard about this in a way. I love preaching on weird passages. I once preached on Lot and his daughters. And that was just great because no one's ever heard a sermon on it. This is slightly different, right? This is, I think we all know it. And yet, uh, maybe we haven't heard it rightly and we want to hear, we need to hear it again. And if we heard it again, well, a bit like those flight safety announcements, right? If this is the most important thing, we need to keep hearing it.

So let's look at this famous parable. And, uh, yeah, I don't know what you think. Jesus told this parable. Normally we have a parable. There's all these metaphors like the seed and I don't know, the coin and the sheep. Uh, this is different. This is basically just a story that's very real.

Uh, but, uh, it is, Jesus tells us who it's for, right? Verse nine, Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. And he trusted to people who were very sure in themselves that they were righteous, which means they thought they were right with God, right? This is the thing. They thought they were, you know, they were accepted by God because, you know, they were righteous. They were right. And Jesus tells a very simple story. Well, there's two men who went up into the temple to pray one, a Pharisee and the other, a tax collector.

Now, of course, this is 2000 years ago, right? So we don't have Pharisees and tax collectors these days. And this is not talking about a government accountants. I mean, what is this about? Right? So you hear this and certainly back then, well, a Pharisee, that is a really respected person, right? This is a devout religious man who, you know, does his best to obey God's law, right? A really good man. And then a tax collector, you probably know a tax collector. Well, back then the government in a way was the Romans who occupied the country. And so this was someone who worked for the oppressor, right? They were a traitor. And why would you be a traitor? Well, because it's good money, because you can extort people. And right. So this is a greedy traitor who is corrupt. And certainly for them, that would be the lowest of the low. And then we hear this story.

[7 : 20] And my guess is we're familiar with it. We know the good guy and the bad guy. But back then, I don't think Jesus' audience would hear it the same way we hear it now after hearing this for 2000 years.

All right. Would you know that they would respect the Pharisee? He is, you hear this, you think it's the good guy. So, so let's look at them. First, here's the Pharisee. He, the Pharisee standing by himself. I mean, this is a holy man, right? See, he wants to keep his distance. And then he stands and he prays. He gives thanks to God. God, I thank you. God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give a ten full, I give tithes of all that I get. And so he is, he's a good person, right? He doesn't do any of these gross sins, right? He doesn't extort people. He's not an, he doesn't sleep around, right? He's faithful to his wife. He's not an adulterer, right? He is a good person. And look at how obedient he is. He fasts twice a week. Now, how often did you have to fast?

Fast under the law? Once a year. And this guy does it like a thousand, you know, a thousand, you know, ten thousand percent more. That's like amazing, right? Twice a week he fasts.

You know, we try to do it once a month for our prayer meeting. And even then, not everyone joins in. But wow, twice a week. And he gives tithes of all that he gets, right? So in the Old Testament, there was this law that you had to give ten percent of your, the produce of your field. That's the way the whole system worked with the temple and kind of food for the Levites. But he gives times of all that he gets, not just his main income.

So if you would have dinner with this guy, right? And he pays for the meal, but then with pay me, kind of, you go, what is it? AA. You do, uh, uh, go, you go Dutch and it's 58 and you give \$60 to him.

[9 : 21] Well, he makes \$2 and guess what he does? He tithes 20 cents. He is so careful about not robbing God, right? He would tithe this 20 cents for the \$2 that you gave him. He is so careful about obeying God.

Now you hear this and you think, what a guy, right? This guy is in some ways a role model. Maybe you have a daughter kind of who is ready for marriage. Well, can I, uh, is this guy still free?

Well, at the same time for others, I mean, you hear the attitude, right? He thinks he is, he's better than others, not just in some others. Well, in a way he says, thank you that I'm better than the rest, better than everyone else. And then most others. And some of us, maybe we'd agree. Maybe you hear this and you think, yeah, I'm, I'm not like that. Not at all. While others of us, maybe we feel our pride pricked, but then here's the other person, a tax collector. And you hear about a tax collector and you know, back then all your prejudices go up, right? This is a traitor. This is, this guy is corrupt.

He extorts people, you know, he extorts his, his own brothers and sisters for the sake of money, right? It's what is he doing in a temple? You know, if you're a tax collector, how can you be believing in God, right? Because surely if you're religious, you wouldn't be a tax collector.

It's hard to believe, but he goes to the temple and he's so different from the Pharisee, right? And what is it that he does? Verse 13, but a tax collector standing far off, wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, right? He was so deeply ashamed of his sin, deeply ashamed of what he's done. And he has a very simple prayer. God be merciful to me, a sinner. And that's not just lip service. It sounds like this sincere cry for help, right? Someone here is someone aware of his sin. And in a way he knows where he stands.

[11 : 18] He knows he doesn't deserve it. He does deserve something. He deserves judgment, right? That's where he stands with God. Now here you have these two people, right?

The good guy and the bad guy, but one who is proud and the other who is crying for help. How would God respond to these two people? You know, how would he respond to two Christians?

One person, God, thank you that I'm not like all the people outside church. Thank you that, you know, I don't sleep around and I don't get drunk and I read my Bible every day and I come on time to the service and, you know, versus a girl who's done all kinds of things that I can't speak about and just, God, I'm such a failure. I'm so terrible. Please forgive me.

How would God respond? I don't know what you would think. I mean, I guess we've heard this parable before, but I know missionaries to Muslims and they made a Muslim version of this with two Muslims going to the mosque and kind of, and you ask them and they all say, well, the Pharisee, that's the good guy, right? That is the person God accepts, the person who does all the routines who does with his flowing robes and gets all the prayers, right? And right. But no, the big surprise in verse 14, I tell you, listen up. This man went down to his house justified rather than the other, the tax collector, the traitor, the extortioner. He gets accepted by God, not the Pharisee, right? Such a big shock for Jesus audience, right? That God welcomes this tax collector. He's justified. He is, he is right with God and not this other guy.

What a snob to the Pharisees, right? For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke is full of these reversals where the people you don't expect get in. And here again, the tax collector is accepted and he will be exalted one day when God shows up and the Pharisee will be humbled. And so the, yeah, I guess the right attitude is humility, but that raises two questions, right? You hear this story and it's just unbelievable, but the two questions, I mean, why is this guy accepted, right? Why is this the right response?

[13 : 42] Now you might hear and think, well, pride and humility is just all that matters. It doesn't matter how good you are. If you're proud, that cancels everything. Well, no matter how bad you are, if you're humble, that's good. Now, of course, pride is a bad thing. You know, it's like the number one sin in some ways in the Bible, but that's a different kind of pride, right? So often it has to do with what we heard last week, the greatness of God, right? If you see a God who is the infinite creator and we are just creatures and we've received everything from him and nothing from ourselves, well, of course we'll be humble, but that is humility because of God's greatness. It's not because of our sinfulness. No, this is a different kind of humility and that doesn't cover all the wrong that this tax collector has done. Of course, the real truth is which of these two guys is a sinner? Which of these two guys is the bad guy? And I think we know the answer is both, right? In the Bible, it's both. It's just only one of them recognizes it.

The word justified is to do with the word righteous. So it's that Jesus tells his people who tells it to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, who were really sure that they were right with God, that God would accept them. He just doesn't think he's a sinner, right?

This Pharisee, okay, maybe I'm not perfect, but I'm pretty good. I'm good enough for God. But at the same time, that would mean that he would really misunderstand sin, right?

I mean, what does he talk about? He just talks about externals, really gross sins. And so, yeah, he hasn't slept around with other women. Sure. Right? And he hasn't extorted or something. And he does simple external things like fasting and tithing. That's very simple.

Of course, what is he? But how about things like his heart? How about his motivations? Are they pure? As we heard two weeks ago, you know, loving God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. Is that what he's doing? And that's the thing in the Bible. We, God's standards are so much higher, right? Because, you know, when it comes to an infinite, perfect God, anything less than perfect is imperfect, right? You know, he just lowers the standards to something that he can meet and then he meets it and he's proud. But he doesn't realize how pure and holy God is. You know, if we really knew God, if we could really see him, none of us would be proud. All of us would be before him. Well, like a tax collector, aware of our sin. Now the tax collector understood his position before God. Actually, I don't think he understood all that stuff about the heart and everything. He just, his external sins was already enough for him to feel condemned. But that's the thing. We, if we think we're good enough for God, we really don't understand the standards. But at the same time, that raises the question, how can then God accept this tax collector? If God is so pure and holy and at such high standards, how can he just let this tax collector in? Right? I mean, objectively, I think the Pharisee is a better person in some way, right? I'm sure he's committed less crimes in some way. Sometimes you hear that, right? Sometimes, uh, some criminal goes to prison and he becomes a Christian and he says, yeah, I've been forgiven everything. And everyone is angry because you know, how can this guy just now suddenly be a Christian and go to heaven when he's done all these bad things?

[17 : 25] Well, this parable was spoken in a way in the old Testament, right? Before, uh, Jesus, the work that Jesus did, the tax collector praise, have mercy. Now there's different words for mercy in the Bible. What he says here has the flavor of, you know, remove your wrath from me. It is related to propitiation. If you've seen that word in the Bible, propitiation, uh, about a sacrifice that brings us back to God. The thing he's asking, please remove your judgment from me. That is what he wants because that is what he knows he deserves. That is what we all need. And wonderfully God accepts him then as righteous. But why? Well, because God's judgment is taken away and how?

Well, a few chapters later, of course, right? In chapter 23, Jesus goes to the cross, right? And Jesus who told this parable, yeah, he went to the cross and as he hung there, he took all the judgment that his people deserved. He took away God's wrath. I mean, God's wrath, it has to go somewhere, right? Sin has to be punished. It doesn't get canceled. Instead, Jesus takes it. And because he takes it, wow, this tax collector can be accepted, right? He can be perfect in God's sight. That's why I call it perfect sinners. It's from a famous book. Uh, yeah, he can be accepted by God just by, well, just by what Jesus did. Uh, it's not that the tax collector was better than the Pharisee. That's not why he gets accepted water. They both need mercy, but he, he asked for it. And so he gets it. That's the thing, right? We are accepted not because we're good, but because we're forgiven. Uh, if you, you see that in other places, I mean, when Jesus hangs on the cross, there is someone very similar. There was a thief hanging there and actually two thieves and one of them, well, he insults Jesus, but the other one, well, we, we know the text, right? He, uh, he knows he's done wrong. Uh, verse 40 in chapter 23, the other rebuked him saying, don't you fear God since you were under the same sentence of condemnation. And we indeed justly for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. And he says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom, he know, he needs mercy and he knows where to ask from Jesus because Jesus, well, he paid the price. And so, yeah, humility should lead us to Jesus, to the one taking away God's wrath, right?

That's what we need. But if we're proud, of course we won't. The Pharisee didn't think he needed forgiveness. He didn't think he needed a savior, someone to take away God's judgment because you didn't need God's judgment. He was good enough. And so, yeah, if you don't think you need it, you won't ask for it, right? As Jesus said, healthy people don't need a doctor.

No, if he would really know his desperate need of forgiveness and how it only comes through Jesus, he would come to Jesus. He would come confessing his sin. He would come humbly and ask him, but that's the thing, right? That's the fundamental truth. The only way, well, it's not because of anything we do. It is purely through Jesus. And that means coming to him with our sin and, and remaining so aware of our sin that we will stick close to Jesus. And then we can't lose that, right? If this is the most important thing, if this is the only way to be accepted, to come humbly to Jesus, then we need to keep hold of that as a church. Well, let's talk about a few ways that that applies. First of all, I guess in becoming a Christian, right? Now, let me talk to you if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're here. I don't know how you would think that, hey, we are, how you're accepted to God, right? But becoming a Christian starts with this. It starts with admitting your sin and asking for mercy. I often meet people, yeah, who still think come to church, maybe, maybe you're here because you want to learn how to be a better person. And the Bible has lots of things to say about how to be a good person, sure. But that is not the thing. You never get to the point that you are now so better enough, so good enough that God accepts us. You know, think about our thoughts. You know, are your thoughts as good as your actions? Because it's very easy to not do things, but to think it. How are your motivations? Are we loving God 100%?

That's the thing, right? Most of us would think, well, we were 80% good, maybe 90% is good. But if you're 90% good, you're 10% bad, right? That's the problem. Would God accept someone who is 10% bad? A criminal who says, hey, I only commit crimes 10% of the time. Is that okay?

[22 : 20] That's not okay, right? No, when it comes to God, it's 100%. And so we need Jesus. You need Jesus. And it starts with this attitude, confessing our sins. Or maybe you're here and you consider yourself a Christian. But actually, what makes you a Christian? And you say, well, because I go to church and I'm a good person and I read my Bible and I pray and all those things. Well, are you sure that God will accept you based on that? If you picture yourself standing before God, do you sound more like the Pharisee or the tax collector? That's a good question, right? You know, if God would ask you, why should I accept you? What would you say? Would you talk about, hey, well, I've done this and this and this? Or would you say, well, actually you shouldn't, but Jesus died for me. Because that is the answer.

And you need, if you maybe, if you think it's about you, maybe you've never really become a Christian. So can I encourage you to look at your sin and see how much you need Jesus and come to him.

And actually, that's not just the start of the Christian life. It's all through life. I mean, the Pharisee and the tax collector, they are not people becoming Jews. They are already Jews. They are already God's people, but it's an ongoing thing, right? But they're still like this.

Anyway, as a Christian, you never graduate from this. It's not that after your baptism, now, okay, now I need to be good enough. No, we continue to, you know, we continue to sin. And so we continue to need Jesus, right? If you're Jesus is the lifeboat, don't get out of the lifeboat because you still can't swim. Now, as Christians, we need to stay humble. I think as Christians, we should, you know, remain so aware of our sin. I mean, hopefully that comes naturally.

I hope when you become a Christian, you know, you start reading the Bible, you get to know God. And well, as you get to know him and how holy he is and how big he is and perfect he is, of course, you will hopefully feel more aware of your sin. It's a strange thing, right? You think when I become a Christian, I become better. Actually, you do, but you will feel more sinful sometimes.

[24 : 34] But at the same time, it's good to be deliberate. You know, as Christians, I think we should make an effort to just, in a way, focus on our sin. That's what we do in church, in a way, with confession and assurance, right? Last week, if you were here, every month, we have this confession where we confess our sins in the service. Actually, it's only once a month. Historically, many churches do it every week. Some Christians do it every day because it's just so helpful, because it gets your heart in the right place. It reminds you, yeah, I need, I'm a sinner.

I mean, imagine if we were Pharisees and every week we have this confession, right? Can we say this together? I don't know now, but imagine us, hey, God, we thank you that we are not like other people, immoral people, greedy drunkards, people who just don't go to church. We read our Bible every day. We're in a CG and we're always on time for the service. Amen. I mean, what does that do? That makes you proud, right? But that points us to ourselves. No, this is what we really say. This is, well, it's not our confession. It's from an Anglican church, from the Anglican church. But yeah, we say, most merciful God, we confess that we've sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done, by what we've undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves, right? You can hear that it's really deep. It's not just some external things. It's our thoughts. It's our words. It's the things we should have done, but didn't. It's loving God with all our hearts, loving our neighbors, not just a bit, but as much as we love ourselves.

That is what we need. And yet we can so easily think like that, right? There's the famous Sunday school teacher who, uh, you know, told this parable and then, okay, let's pray. Thank you, God, that we are not like the Pharisee. Still didn't get it right. So easy to think, well, yeah, I'm a pretty good Christian and that's why God will accept me because I do this. Thank you, God, that we understand the gospel so well. Thank you that we are a gospel centered church and we really understand how we are saved. We are not saved by theology. We're saved by Jesus, right? And no matter how well you understand the gospel, unless you really hold on to Jesus because you need him so much, you're still trusting in the wrong thing. No, we, please meditate on your sin or your sin. Please confess daily. If you can, maybe as part of your quiet time, maybe at the end of the day, before you go to bed, look back over the day, you know, see things that God has done that are so good to you. And yet at the same time, think of all the things you've done wrong, just to keep your heart in the right place, keep you close to Jesus.

Of course, it's not just our personal faith. Thirdly, I guess that should shape our community, right? Because that's partly here in the passage. Jesus told this to people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt, right? The Pharisees, they look down on everyone else. And of course, if you're proud, if you're better, why wouldn't you look down on those who are less good than you? But imagine what a terrible church we would be then, right? If all of us here were proud of our achievements and all of us were, you know, just trying to be as good as we could, right? And all of us, and that's the atmosphere here and people come here and they feel like they have to come along, right? And then maybe their life is not sorted out and they see us and our life looks so great. We are all so great. They would just feel condemned. No, a church should be a place where I think we're open to each other, where we're honest, where we are aware of our sin. And I guess then treat everyone with the same mercy and love. I mean, there's no one I know better than myself, right? And I know myself and I know what goes on in my heart and in my mind. You know, how can I judge someone else? How can I feel better than them if I know, right? Ideally, Christian community is such a place of grace and mercy. Doesn't mean we don't take sin seriously. The Bible tells us to take sin seriously, but always with grace and mercy.

And of course, then our witness as well, right? Again, I think of people coming in, you know, there's often a problem with Christians, right? The holier than thou kind of attitude where Christians, you know, I guess in many ways, Christians often on the surface live a better life than many people in the world, but it's not about the externals, right? As Christians, we know God, we know his standards. Christians should be the most humble people in the world because we actually know what God's standards are. But so often we're not, right? And that puts people off. They see the hypocrisy. Now, if we are a humble church, a church where the message is not, we are better than you.

[29 : 31] And so be like us, where the message is actually, we're no different from you. We are sinners like you, but there is someone who can forgive. That is the right message, right? The message of forgiveness, the message, yeah, that we're accepted, not what we've done, but based on Jesus' death on the cross. And that's the only way. And as Christians, I think we know that and we've received that.

And so many people in Hong Kong haven't. And that's the problem, right? I mean, that's why we're moving. We're moving to Viva. And of course, it will be nice and there'll be more parking and a nice station.

But ultimately, we want that parking and the MTR to be for people who need the gospel so that they can come more easily to Jesus because you need to go through the church to get to Jesus. But they will only hear it if we're humble. And we may have a great venue and people have great parking.

And then people come to church and there's just about a bunch of proud hypocrites. People are not going to get the gospel, right? No, if we are a true gospel community, that is what we want. When Jesus, he wants to offer his grace. He wants to offer free salvation for sinners. Let's make sure that's clear, right? For ourselves. We've gladly received it. If you're a Christian, you know how wonderful it is to be forgiven. Well, we can share that grace with all who come. And that is what we want.

So let's reflect on that. You know, let me just give you 20 seconds to think and then I'll pray. And during that time, if the stewards can come up and we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper.

[31 : 27] Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for your grace. We know, we should know at least how sinful we are, how far short we fall because of who we are, children of Adam. Thank you that Jesus came to deal with that.

Jesus came to bring forgiveness, to take away the judgment we deserve. Please help us to hold on to that, Lord. We know this is the most important thing. The only one we need on that day is Jesus and nothing else. Help us to hold on. Help us to make that the center of our lives, that we are sinners.

But Jesus is a great Savior. Our hearts are deceitful. They lead us astray. They make us proud. They make us look at the wrong things. They make us look at others. But we just want to focus on you. And then we know how much we need Jesus. So do that work in us. Keep us close. And would that be something that speaks, speaks to those around us, speaks to people who will come to Watermark and that they can see that, yeah, if God can save us, if you can save us, you can save them.

And you want to save them because you even wanted to save us how little we deserve it. So please, as we share the Lord's Supper in a moment, remind us again of how much you love us.

[33 : 03] In Jesus' name. Amen.