

How are we? If you have your Bibles, turn to Luke 18. Now I've been very slowly moving through Luke 18, and the reason is because it attacks an age old issue from a different angle than the modern church has attacked it. So let me unpack very quickly the last four or five weeks for you. There are two ways to belittle the God of the universe. The first way and the one made popular in the modern period is to belittle Him by acting like He doesn't exist. So everything that's beautiful, everything that is good and everything that is lovely is just some sort of mathematical chance. Or if you want to play the Agnostic role, if there is a God, maybe He somehow had something to do with that, maybe He started it and then backed away. So one way to belittle is to act like He doesn't exist, to live like He doesn't exist and to disobey any of the commands that He reveals to humanity through natural or specific revelation. That's one way to belittle God. You see that all the time.

And church historically has grabbed that one and has run with it. So growing up, I heard if you get drunk, you need to repent; if you sleep around, you need to repent; if you use naughty words, repent. You need to invent naughty words like a good Christian. Shoot fire and shucks. You use good replacement words as opposed to bad replacement words. You could probably fill in the blank for me here. If you do this, repent. If you do this, repent. If you do this, repent. And so that was kind of the modern message. "Don't do these things, and if you do these things, you're wicked." So then what gets shaped is, "Okay, I need to be better." If you go to church and hear that enough, the ideology that's being built into you is, "I must become better. I must become Ned Flanders." Which means you were told if you're not a good father, if you're not a good mother, if you're not a good husband, if you're not a good wife, if you're not a good worker, if you're not an honest man, then shame on you...repent. And that created this momentum towards this that says, "Be a good man, be a good father, be a good worker, be honest" and the bulk of us grow up hearing that message and we go, "I've got to be better." And we define that better, really depending on where you were. So for some of us, it got as detailed as, "I don't listen to certain types of music. I only listen to music that's about Jesus." So we get into this really lame, ignorant, unbiblical, silly game that we've called Evangelicalism for a long time. In fact, those of you who are my age, we went to stadiums to hear other men tell us how to be better men.

So the reason we've gone so slow in Luke 18 is because Jesus is actually attacking it from the other side. Like Jesus doesn't say, "You drunken, sexually perverse, wicked men and women, you repent!" He actually goes the other way. He goes, "You good men, you good fathers, you good mothers, you good businessmen, you God-belittling, self-exalting, religious, self-righteous sinner, you repent!" He goes the other way, and I never heard that growing up. I never went to church and heard the pastor go, "Um, I need to talk to the good men in here. The good ones, not the rest of you bums. Those of you who have loved your wife well, you've never cheated, those of you who play with your kids every night and do a little family devotional, I want to talk to you tonight, you God-belittling, self-exalting, wicked person." I just never heard it, but that's what Luke 18 is over and over again. It's against the righteous, not against the sinner. In fact, it's this weird thing that's happening because He's calling man-made righteousness sin. And this is where the Law sends us to Jesus on the cross. Because if the Law, when disobeyed, makes you a sinner, and the Law, when obeyed, makes you a self-righteous, self-justifying, pride filled religious bigot, then you can't win. So the Law wasn't given so that we obey it, but it was given to reveal to us that regardless of what we do, we're doomed. And maybe some of you don't have that much church background are right now going, "Now why am I supposed to be happy about that? Why am I supposed to be excited that I'm in trouble if I don't and I'm in trouble if I do?"

I'll answer that in a little bit, but here's what happens. Remember that the disciples left everything to follow Jesus. They left their families, they left their money to follow Jesus. So after the rich young ruler goes away sad and goes, "That cat ain't getting into the kingdom of heaven," Peter goes, "What about us? Do we get in?" And I'm going to pick it up there and show you some things and I've got to define some things for us. Starting in Luke 18:26, "Those who heard [what Jesus said to the rich young ruler] said, "Then who can be saved?" But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

So now this apparently is not enough for Peter, because Peter actually grows more concerned. And unlike the other twelve, Peter does not mind being vocal. "And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house..." Now don't think of "house" in the modern sense. Like earlier today, I left my house, I came here and Lord willing, I'm going back to my house. That's not this word. When Jesus came to Peter, Peter was fishing with his father. Peter's father was a fisherman, his father's father would have been a fisherman, his great grandfather was probably a fisherman. So for Peter to leave his house wasn't just leaving his father's home, a brick and mortar building; it was him leaving financial viability, his future job, his definition in society. I've got some friends in here tonight from small towns. When you're from a small town, if you work at the bank, you're the banker. You are defined by whatever your role is in culture. That's not that way in the sprawling metroplex. No one goes, "Ah, there's Matt the IT consultant." We're not defined by our position, but in a small town you are. So Peter would have been identified as "Ah, Peter the fisherman." This is the same thing you see with Jesus in Nazareth when they say, "Is this not the carpenter's son?" So this isn't "Oh, he left his house;" this is him leaving really what defines him.

Let's keep going. "...there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children,..." Let me just be clear here that this is not an endorsement by Jesus to abandon your spouse. 1 Corinthians is going to make it very clear that a minister has the right when on mission to take his wife with him, to have his wife supported by that mission. Although some people in the modern era have taken that to ridiculous proportions. More on that later though. This is not an endorsement to abandon your spouse, but this is speaking to those who leave their family for a season or maybe have their wife leave them because of professed belief.

Let's continue, "...there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." So if you look at the other two places that this story is told in the other synoptic gospels, He doesn't say "many times more," they actually say "a hundred times more." Luke doesn't go quite into the same amount of detail. Jesus is saying, "Anyone one who follows Me, anyone who has Me as supreme and leaves anything behind will be repaid for whatever they leave a hundred times what that thing was worth." Now that's a pretty fascinating promise. Now there's all this ridiculous teaching that's on television right now. My favorite example was a guy begging for money to reach people in other countries for Christ and he's got giant diamond cuff links on and he's raising money for a private jet to fly to those locations and help those poor people. I remember looking at that and going, "I would like to physically harm him. I would like to have an octagon, put a mouthpiece in and lock the gate behind me and go to town on this boy. I cannot take a lot of guys in a fight, but this guy would not take me long." That's the type of rage that was building in me. All ridiculous, unbiblical, unhistorical, unorthodox teaching usually has its root in something that's true. So right now, a very popular version of Christianity that in the end is not Christianity at all is called the Prosperity Gospel. Just as a general rule, anytime anyone puts a word in front of "gospel," you no longer have the gospel. This is a general rule. If someone preaches the "Liberation Gospel," it's no longer the gospel. Nothing goes in front of that word in regards to descriptive. The Prosperity Gospel, pitched by a lot of guys on TV, including a very popular one who lives in Houston, says that if you put your faith in God, if you muster the faith to follow Him, if you will simply trust Him with your life and money (usually by donating to them), you will be given health, you will be given wealth and you will be given the desires of your heart and the best life imaginable right now, and that's the gospel. Now if what we read is true, Jesus certainly did promise rewards for those who follow Him, did He

not? So the problem with the Prosperity Gospel, like other heresies that God will judge, is that it takes the Bible farther than it takes it and it ignores the bulk of Scriptures that say what those rewards are. So what happens is men who the Bible calls peddlers of God's word, men who use the Scriptures to make themselves wealthy will ignore giant sections of Scripture and proof-text and pull a Scripture like this one and tell you, "If you'll just plant a faith seed into the Village Church of \$1000, God will revisit that on you a hundred fold. In fact, let me read this to you. Sally Jo was a woman who didn't have any money, and she sent in \$80. And within several weeks \$80,000 fell out of the sky in gold bricks in her front yard, and what had happened was..." And there are all these miraculous stories about how someone sowed their seed and somehow got back a lot more. Is this foreign to you? Am I the only one who watches television?

Now that's the far left end. The center version of it is that most of us, because we grew up in church that says sinners need to repent and we haven't heard that righteous people need to repent of this, what we're trying to do is be better people, nicer people and more well behaved people. So when things don't work out for us like we think they should, we feel betrayed by God because we feel like we did what God says we should do and He's not doing for us what He owes us. That happens all the time. Now the parts of the Bible they ignore show that it's simply not true that if you follow Christ obediently, you get health and wealth. You literally can pick anyone you want in the Bible to prove this. Just pick a guy. Of John the Baptist, Jesus says, "There's never been a greater man born of a woman." Do you know how John the Baptist dies? It's not on a golden throne surrounded by opulence with six-pack abs. He's in a prison, and he gets his head cut off because some perverse, wicked 50 year old is seduced by a 14 year old stripper. "What do you want? I'll give you anything you want." "I want the head of John the Baptist." And he went down there and cut off his head. Just tell me what to do with that text, my friend in Houston. Okay friend, we can talk about David who was obedient to the Lord and made Israel one of the wealthiest countries the world has ever known. We can talk about him wealthy and beautiful. But I believe that his son raped his daughter. And on top of that, I believe his son led a rebellion against him that ousted him from the throne. And before that, he actually spent 10-12 years running for his life after God told him he was going to be king. Do we need to keep going? We can just keep picking them, it just keeps happening this way. So it's a farce, it's silly. You don't control God. You don't control Him with your actions. You don't get to manipulate Him by going, "I'll do this and He must do this because I did this." That's not how that works. That's not how the universe works.

So that leaves this pretty big question for us. What's the reward for following Him? I think it's two-fold. I'm going to give you the lesser first and then the primary second. Flip over to Acts 2. We are shaped by our culture whether we like it or not, and our culture is one of rugged individualism. Which means we pride ourselves on being able to get it done and handle it, specifically men. We have brought rugged individualism into Christianity, and now our version of Christianity has been shaped by that rugged individualism. So much so that when people talk about the gospel and conversion, they always talk about the individual effects of conversion but rarely talk about the corporate implications of individual conversion. I'll explain what I mean by that. Let's go, Acts 2, starting in verse 42, "And [the disciples] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." I have always loved this text in regards to what the church can be. I don't know what your background is or what's in your past, but for me the Christian community has been this unbelievably powerful, shaping, convicting, encouraging, uplifting force. And it's been that for me not only where I've lived but in '98 when I went to India and met my brothers in India who loved the same God, worshiped the same God, broke bread, celebrated communion, baptized their family. It was the same way in China. We are saved not just from sin, but we are saved into a covenant community that is to exalt Christ by lowering ourselves and exalting those around us. And this is a beautiful gift from God. It is a shaping, transforming, powerful tool.

If I had to guess and we were honest, Acts 2:42-47 has not been most of our church experience. Is there anybody who wants to go, "Oh, that's actually kind of normative. The last church I was at was selling the things that they owned to help all in need"? No, it's actually quite the opposite. Were any of you in a church that split over something silly? By something silly I mean, "My child will not walk on maroon carpet." Have any of you ever had a pastor that failed morally, either sexually, financially or anything like that? It seems like they're dropping like flies lately. Has anybody just been betrayed or wounded by a church you were a part of? Has anybody gotten into the crazy, nut-job fundamentalists where they're like, "Oh, long hair. So you must hate Jesus. Is that a Boyz II Men CD? Church discipline"? This is much more in line with our church experience, isn't it?

So how can our reward, which is the covenant community of faith, that we might love one another, encourage one another, walk with one another, provide for one another, challenge one another, push one another on towards maturity, how can it be such a mess? There are several reasons; let me run through them very quickly. The first one is Paul refers to people who have just been converted to Christ as babies. And here's the thing, babies act like babies. So they cry a lot, they suck their thumbs, they throw themselves on the ground, they snatch from their siblings. Babies act like babies. So let me tell you where I think the church has doomed itself, specifically in the West. When all of your energy and all of your might is spent trying to get people to come and hang out at to your church and no energy, money or time is being spent on how to grow those people into maturity, then what do you have? Day care. You have a bunch of spiritually immature, bottle fed grown men and women. So there's a lot of fights in that environment. That's one of the big problems. Anytime a church even tries to hold you accountable for anything, you just blow out and go to the next place. Anytime a church would have the courage to tell you, "This is what it looks like for you to submit to the Scriptures. This is what it means to be part of a covenant community," because of that rugged individualism, we go, "Uh uh, you don't tell me how to do it. The Bible doesn't tell me how to do it. I tell me how to do it." And then you bounce. That's part of the problem.

Here's the second thing. Because we're far more interested in looking successful to the world around us, we want to be big and we want to be liked, and we are far less likely to push people to be regenerate, legitimately converted believers in Jesus Christ. So here's what I'm basically saying. Christians make better Christians than non-Christians make Christians. I'll say it this way. A person who has been transformed by the Spirit's power slowly but surely begins to be conformed to the image of His Son. There are far too many places where unregenerate men and women, men and women who might confess with their mouth but have no evidence in their heart and in their life that they are followers of Jesus Christ, are allowed to teach Sunday school, are allowed to lead home groups and are allowed to take leadership roles in the church. So what you end up with is people who are not converted to Jesus Christ leading people who are converted to Jesus Christ. And here's the thing. Do you know what makes me a good pastor? I'm a Christian. I am a far more effective Christian by being one than by not. So when your message has been, "Don't drink, don't smoke, don't cuss, don't watch rated-R movies, don't listen to Boyz II Men," when that's your list, you've pushed everybody here to "listen to this, do this" and you've got these people over here now doing this, doing this and doing this, it doesn't mean that you're a little less wicked than those other people; it simply means you're a little bit cleaner and you're allowed to be a deacon now. But it does not mean you are converted.

And now for the last one. That sort of rugged individualism that's in our culture means that the bulk of you go to church but few of you belong to a church. And those two things are very different. Going to church and belonging to a community of faith are very different ideas. Our culture, particularly in the South, is that we're not really loyal along denominational lines (I'm not complaining) and we don't really belong anywhere, we just go. So that means that a lot of you go to the Village, but you also go to Watermark. You go to the Village, but you also go Fellowship. And then some of you over-achievers, you're at Valley Creek, Fellowship, Denton Bible and the Village just to make sure you're getting in when the trumpet sounds. So by never really belonging to a covenant community of faith, you are not known nor do you

know anyone well enough to reap the reward of a covenant community. I have been called out dozens and dozens of times by good friends of mine who are able to pull me aside and say, "That wasn't godly. Is that who you want to be or is this who you want to be?" I never respond well to it at first. I would never say anything out loud, but my first thought is, "Who do you think you're talking to, boy? I know you're not talking to me." I'm far too self-righteous to ever say that out loud. They'd repeat it back to me later and I'd be in more trouble. I just think it. But what kind of love is that? That is a far deeper kind of love than to watch someone shipwreck their life from afar. One of the rewards is a covenant community, that we are brothers and sisters and I should not think of myself more highly than I ought to, that I should serve you, love you, encourage you and if I can meet your needs, to do that. Paul would tell the ministers in Corinth, "We are slaves to the body." I've always loved that language. It's what we try to instill into our pastors. Yeah, the church is the body, it's the reward. So I'm wondering where you are in this. Do you belong to a community of faith? Do you just go to? It's not a reward if you just go to. I don't care how good the show is. It's not a reward if you're not belonging to a community of faith.

That's the first reward, and it's secondary. Here's the first and primary reward. Flip over to Hebrews 10. We're going to pick it up in verse 32. "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,..." So they didn't just suffer, but they really struggled with those sufferings. Because some people just struggle well. They did not do well; they were struggling with the sufferings. Now look, "...sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction,..." They were publicly embarrassed...publicly. I know some people who would rather die than be publicly humiliated. They would rather you kill them than publicly humiliate them. I read this week that several decades ago when the Chinese government kicked all the Western missionaries out and then killed thousands and thousands of Chinese pastors. The ones they left were publicly shamed. They made them garbage men who had to go from house to house to house to pick up trash. A government bent on crushing Christianity made the remaining pastors go door to door throughout the country. How awesome is that? Do you remember the part where God directs the hands of the king? "We'll crush it by humiliating them and make them garbage men. Let's make them go to every door in the Empire and pick up trash (and plant churches).

"...sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one." I've said this since I got here hundreds and hundred of times. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not that if you follow Him, everything will go as you deem it should. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that through the cross of Christ, by faith and grace alone, you get reconciled to God, and that's enough regardless of situation. And you're seeing it right here where men and women are publicly being shamed and having their stuff stolen from them. And they're not happy about it, but they're joyful about it because they know that there's a greater treasure, one that's already there. For them, Jesus is enough even in that moment. So according to this text, Jesus is seen as glorious not when you're healthy, wealthy and all is going well, but it's when Jesus is seen as supreme and the beauty He is and even when everything has been stolen and you're publicly shamed, you still praise His name. You get Jesus, that's the reward. Here, now, He's enough.

Now He also promised that in the age to come you get eternal life. The idea of heaven used to really bother me. It bothered me because the idea of being in a white robe playing a harp and singing for a trillion years was just more than I could take. Am I all alone on that? I think how I've usually pointed it out is Amazing Grace. Even at 11 and 12 we were going, "When we've been there ten thousand years bring shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun." And so I'm going, "Ten thousand years, that is a long time, man." And so theologians would come along side you and go, "You'll have a new body." I'm going, "I just hope I've got some strong quads if I'm going to be standing there singing for ten thousand years." So a very popular idea today is that one day God's just going to nuke all the wicked people and then all the good people are going to get sucked up into heaven. And then like in Tom

and Jerry, we're going to float up with a little balloon on our tail and get a gown and a harp and just sing for eternity. The problem with that is actually that the Bible doesn't teach that. Actually God is restoring all things so that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Romans 8 tells us that even creation has been subjected to futility so that at the restoration of all things with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God, even the most perfect, beautiful things you can imagine here now are unbelievably wretched and wicked looking and will be restored. In some of Augustine's writings, he's looking out and watching the sun go down, and it has lit up the ocean to where it looks like the it was on fire and the sky is orange and pink. He said it was just a profoundly beautiful picture and he wrote, "If these are the beauties afforded to sinful men, what does God have in store for those who love Him?" If you've ever stood at the base of the Grand Canyon and felt small and it looked so big and so beautiful, God's going, "Meh, that's not what I really had in mind, but in a sinful, broken world, that's it." If you've ever stood at the base of Everest and saw how massive that thing is, God would go, "I was going to make it bigger, but sin..." If you've every been able to scuba dive or snorkel and see under the water with all that color and all that, God's going, "No, that's really not what I had in mind. There are colors you can't fathom. There are sights you can't imagine. The restoration of all things, ever increasing joy, new bodies, the death of everything that separation from God brought, the death of anger, the death of shame, the death of poverty... it's a new world that we're brought into, not harps and white gowns. You can probably work those in the new world I suppose. Eternal life, unseparated from God. In fact, the Bible says we'll have no more need for the sun, for the Lord will be their light.

Now, let me chat with you about a couple of things here. I think what happens to all of us whether we're on this side or that side is we begin to grab hold of things and they feel like life to us. So over here sin just feels like it's what defines us because we'd just feel like we'd be naked without doing certain things, we wouldn't know how to define ourselves without them. But over here, the religious person does the same thing. Not doing those sinful things is what defines them. And for both of them, salvation is a transfer of trust. It's a transfer of trust off of those things into the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. We sing a song here at the Village called I Boast No More. One of the lines from that is, "The best obedience of my hands dares not appear before Thy throne, but faith can answer Thy demands by pleading what the Son has done." So when I stand in front of God, it's not that I used to be bad and now I'm good, or even that I've been good and obeyed all of His commands. It's the cross of Christ, it's all of God. And this is the message of Luke 18.

So I'm wondering what we're holding on to that we need to let go of. I'm wondering if God's not saying to some of you, "Hey, we need to leave some of this behind," and we just can't seem to do it. And so tonight, my hope is that how God worked Peter over would sit in your mind. Obedience in Christ, following Him, the freedom that comes in the cross, it's not about restraint; it's about freedom. It's about God leading you into what He created this thing to be. And so for some of us, that's relationships that God's going, "We've got to move on from these," and we just can't let go. For some of us, it's that you're so defined by your pretty, clean, "I don't have any problems," judgmental, self-righteous facade. We need to walk away from that and into the freedom of the cross of Jesus Christ. Because there's both reward in this life and the life to come. And it's not necessarily money or health or a spouse or children or a good job or a good vacation; it's Him and He's enough. And it's this community of faith that He's given us, to do life deeply with one another. I think you see that most clearly in tragedy, to watch people hurt here, to watch people die here and watch the community collide with them, love them, walk with them, support them, stay with them. There are some people here who have lost their spouses who didn't just get the "Hey, hope you're alright" and two weeks later they're all alone. Four or five years later they are still being loved on, encouraged and walked with. This is the community of faith, and what binds us is the cross. Alright, what are you holding on to? What needs to be let go of? Are you following Him? Are you leaving behind what would hinder and rob you of the joys, both in this life and the one to come?

Let's pray, "Father, we just ask for Your help. There are some of us and we're over here on the right and we've just lived like You don't exist and You don't need to be listened to or followed. So my prayer is that they would understand Your

grace tonight and understand Your pursuit of them, Your love for them regardless of how long they've been away. But this whole series, my heart's just been on the left where we've just got so many men and women who define themselves with their good behavior, so many men and women who define themselves with their church attendance, so many people who define themselves above and beyond others where they go, 'Well, I'm not that guy...I'm not as bad as this...I'm not as bad as that.' And all of it is God belittling. So help us to repent of these things. Help us to find our confidence in You and You alone and in the cross. And I pray that we might, with joy, walk away from homes and wives and children and brothers for the sake of the kingdom. Help us. It's for Your beautiful name. Amen."

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