



“Kingdom Recipients”
Luke 18:9-17

Idea: Personal humility positions a person for divine exaltation.

Intro: Millions of people are immigrating to the United States each year. According to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection data, federal agents encountered roughly 2.5 million migrants at the southern border in 2023. This figure encapsulates the number of people who were stopped and processed at the border. It does not include the number of “got-aways.” In addition to those migrants, many other people lawfully immigrate to the U.S. each year. America is a nation of immigrants. It is a beautiful thing. So, what is it about this country and its ideals that attracts people from around the world? I believe the simple answer boils down to three things: freedom, prosperity, and safety.

For immigrants to enjoy the fullness of the freedoms and prosperity America has to offer, they need to pursue full integration through citizenship. The federal government’s guide to naturalization offers seven benefits of citizenship:

- Voting.
- Bringing family members to the U.S.
- Obtaining citizenship for children born abroad.
- Traveling with a U.S. passport.
- Becoming eligible for federal jobs.
- Becoming an elected official.
- Showing your patriotism.

The way to become a recipient of these benefits is to become a citizen. There are certain requirements that are attached to the benefits of citizenship. They are:

- Give up all prior allegiance to any other nation or sovereignty.
- Swear allegiance to the United States.
- Support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States.
- Serve the country when required.

Citizenship and the benefits that come with it are not unique to America or the modern world. We find it all throughout history and even in the Bible. For example, when the Apostle Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and ordered to be examined by flogging by the Roman tribune, he asked if it was lawful to flog an uncondemned Roman citizen (Acts 22:25). Paul was a citizen of Rome by birth; therefore, he was afforded and enjoyed the rights of Roman citizenship. The tribune he stood before had purchased his citizenship, but he enjoyed the same rights.

The next passage in our study of Luke's Gospel addresses the way in which a person becomes a Kingdom citizen.

Read Luke 18:9-17.

Inquiry: The parable in the preceding verses that we looked at last Sunday teaches that persistent prayer reveals what we think of God. The parable before us today that contrasts two prayers reveals what we think of ourselves. We learn from this passage that there is a right and proper way to enter the Kingdom of God. A person cannot make their own laws or develop their own procedure. The only way to become a recipient of the Kingdom is to enter on God's terms, which requires humility. As we walk through these verses and talk about Kingdom recipients, I want you to see four requirements. Kingdom recipients:

1. Know their own sin.

Luke clues us in on the reason for the parable in verse 9. As Jesus was teaching on the Kingdom and calling people into it, there were some who disregarded His message, thinking they did not need it. Luke says they *"trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt."* These men believed that their observance of the Law positioned them in a right-standing with God. Their ability to faithfully follow the mandates laid out by Moses and to observe the teachings of the rabbis blinded them to their own sin. Rather than seeing and acknowledging their sinfulness before God, they saw only their righteousness.

Recognizing their spiritual blindness, Jesus told a parable that contrasted two men and two prayers. The people who *"trusted in themselves"* in the crowd are represented by the Pharisee. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Pharisees had earned the reputation of being "a body of Jews known for surpassing the others in observance of piety and exact interpretation of the laws." They were the most highly esteemed group in Jewish society. They were the religious elite and the conservatives of their day. On the other hand, the tax collectors were the scum of Jewish society. These enforcers of the Roman tax system were Jews who extorted their brethren for personal gain. As such, they were regarded as religious and political traitors to Hebrew society. In today's culture, the closest social equivalent would be drug pushers and pimps, those who prey on society, who make money off others' bodies and make a living of stealing from others. The tax collector represents those who know their own sin.

The Pharisee believed himself to be a recipient of the Kingdom, which is evident by his position and disposition. First, he is standing in a place of prominence (vs. 11). The contrasting position of the tax collector in verse 13 suggests that the Pharisee moved to the front of the Court of Israel within the temple precincts. The sense is that he came to the temple at the precise hour of prayer, entered the Court of Israel, and drew near to the altar of burnt offering. Then he stood up, so all could see his substantial phylacteries, and began to pray.

Second, his prayer is self-absorbed, which is evident by the five uses of the personal pronoun "I." He congratulates himself for how well he has lived. In essence, he is telling God how blessed He is to have him in His Kingdom.

Third, to highlight his righteousness, the Pharisee looks down on those who are sinners (vs. 11). He even went so far as to point out the tax collector and his sin. His disposition reveals that rather than being a lover of God, he was a lover of self. He was oblivious to his own sin, yet the Bible makes it clear that everyone is a sinner and as such, under the just judgment of God.

...None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks for God...²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... – Rom 3:10-11, 23

By contrast, the tax collector recognized his sin (vs. 13). He knew that he was a sinner. Feeling unworthy, he positioned himself in the back of the court and would not lift his eyes. Instead, he bowed before the Lord and lamented his sin.

The tax collector was justified, made right with God, not because of who he was but how he positioned himself before the Lord (vs. 14). He recognized his own sin and confessed it. Kingdom recipients know their own sin.

2. Weigh themselves only against Jesus.

The Pharisee *“treated others with contempt.”* As he prayed, he thanked the Lord that he was not like other men, *“extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”* The tax collector, by comparison, never mentioned anyone else while in the presence of God. He stood condemned by his own sin, which is true of everyone. The Pharisee weighed himself over and against other people. He picked out the worst of the worst for comparison. Who would not look good in such a group? Unfortunately, Kingdom citizenship is not granted in groups. We are not placed in groups and selected for entry into the Kingdom like Hollywood week of American Idol. In other words, Jesus does not evaluate the make-up of a particular group of people and make a judgment saying, “Back row, you are moving on to the Kingdom. Front row, I am sorry, but this is the end of the road for you.”

Entry into the Kingdom is a personal evaluation of what one has done with the Gospel. It is a comparison of that individual to Jesus Christ. The command of God to every person is to be holy because God is holy (Lev 11:45; 1 Pet 1:16). The standard is God Himself. Paul makes clear that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* We dare not try to make ourselves look better than we are by comparing ourselves to other sinners. Both woefully miss the mark of God’s righteousness.

The tax collector was justified by God because he compared himself only to the Lord, recognizing how short of that standard he fell. Kingdom recipients weigh themselves only against Jesus.

3. Ask for mercy.

The Pharisee never asked for mercy. Instead, he offered to God his spiritual resume. He made sure the Lord knew how great he was. Outwardly, he was not lying. The man was not an extortioner or adulterer. He stood for justice and took his spiritual disciplines serious. He looked very good to a watching world. Conversely, the tax collector looked anything but good to the watching world there in Israel. He was an extortioner who unjustly stole from his brethren. Yet, as the tax collector stood before the Lord and came under conviction of his sin through the gospel, he asked for mercy.

The grand difference between these two men and their dispositions was that the Pharisee stood before the Lord in his own righteousness, while the tax collector humbly bowed before the Lord in need of His righteousness. For this reason, the tax collector was justified by God because he asked for mercy. Here we are reminded of Paul’s words to the Romans: *“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Rom 10:13). This man’s background did not mean anything to God other than that he was a sinner who needed mercy. Likewise, no human pedigree means anything to God other than that all have sinned and need His mercy. The tax collector was justified because He humbly asked for mercy. Kingdom recipients ask for mercy.

4. Exercise simple faith.

Verse 14 ends with the picture of the humble tax collector being exalted by Christ, and this theme of humility continues on in verses 15-17. As Jesus was teaching, parents began to bring their children to Him to be blessed. Thinking about our modern baby dedications in the church helps us to understand

what these parents were doing. They sought to dedicate their children to the Lord and have His blessing rest on them. Well, while they were bringing these kids to Jesus, the disciples rebuked them. They seemed to be just as unenlightened as the rest of their culture as it pertained to children.

In response to the disciples, Jesus commanded them not to prevent the children from coming to Him. By doing so, Jesus called the children to Himself. This was a further demonstration of His acceptance of the least of these. No one is beyond His reach and acceptance.

He then stated that the Kingdom of God belongs to this kind of person...a child. Now, we cannot help but wonder what is meant by this statement. Contextually, Luke tells us that infants and children were being brought to Jesus. Ontologically, the great distinctive of an infant, and to a lesser degree that of older children, is helplessness. Jesus has in mind here the objective state that every child who has ever lived has experienced helpless dependence. A naked newborn lying on the table with flailing hands and feet lifted toward the ceiling is a heart-wrenching profile of helplessness. Unlike other creatures, this helplessness extends for years. You see, no child can survive its early years without the help of others. Children trust others for everything – food, lodging, protection, education, transportation, etc.

Every child born into the world is absolutely and completely helpless. The same is true of every child born into the Kingdom of God. To be a recipient of the Kingdom requires that you enter it helplessly. It requires that you trust Jesus with everything to do with salvation and eternal life. It requires humility. Think about the state of infants. They are not too proud for mom and dad to change their dirty diapers. They are not too proud to be held and fed. They are not too proud to be washed and dressed. They are helpless, so they trust mom and dad to care for them. The same is true of those who come to Jesus. Kingdom recipients exercise simple faith in Jesus, humbly trusting in His death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sin and newness of life. The tax collector was justified because he exercised simple faith.

Conclusion: Millions of people immigrate to the United States every year, looking for a better life. They come to this great nation seeking freedom, prosperity, and safety. They understand the blessings that come with being an American citizen, which is evident by the risk they take and the price they pay to get here. Similarly, the passage before us reminds us of the blessings that are ours as citizens of God's Kingdom. We learn that there is a right and proper way to enter the Kingdom. A person cannot make their own laws or develop their own procedure. The only way to become a recipient of the Kingdom is to enter on God's terms, which requires humility. Kingdom recipients must know their own sin, weigh themselves only against Jesus, ask for mercy, and exercise simple faith.

Have you approached the Kingdom on God's terms? What keeps you from humbling yourself so that God might exalt you with His blessing of salvation?