

**Righteousness: Recognition &  
Response**

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Righteousness: Recognition & Response  
By: Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy  
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Luke 18:9-17

He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that  
they were righteous  
He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves  
He told this parable to some  
    Who trusted in themselves  
        That they were righteous  
            And regarded others with contempt

Let those with ears, hear and let us pray.

...words of my mouth, meditations of our hearts...

The Gospel according to Luke is obsessed with the issue of righteousness. A whole host of characters are labeled righteous throughout the 3rd Gospel: Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Simeon, the Centurion and Joseph of Arimathea are all labeled righteous because of their integrity and faithful deeds before God. And then of course righteousness is one of the chief ways Luke characterizes Jesus: he is the fulfillment and total embodiment of God's righteousness.

But as Jesus enters into ministry, he clearly states that he has not come to call the righteous but sinners. One minute he claims that the righteous will be raised from the dead, but the next minute he claims that it's better for 1 sinner to repent than 99 righteous. He constantly rebukes the power elite of his day for their false displays of righteousness, particularly the Roman overlords, Pharisees and Sadducees. There seems to be a play on words going on here or at least a double meaning. And if we're not careful, we might miss the righteous for the righteous.

Hebrew

Tseh'-dek: the product of upright, moral action in accordance with some form of divine plan.

Greek

Dikaios: observing divine laws in a wide sense.

You'll notice that in both of the definitions, the recurrence of divine law or divine plan. Righteousness, in a literal sense, has something to do with obedience to God and God's will. But I'll also point out that these phrases of divine law and divine plan are accompanied by words that complexity what might, at first, seem obvious. Hear them again.

- Righteousness: the product of upright, moral action in accordance with some form of divine plan.
- Righteousness: observing divine laws in a wide sense.
- "some form of divine plan"
- "divine laws...in a wide sense"

What's with the abstraction? With the watered-downness? In an answer to that, let's go directly to verses 11 & 12 of Luke 18 where the Pharisee is pontificating in prayer about how brilliantly obedient he is to God's law. "I don't steal, I don't lie, I don't cheat on my wife, I don't even collect taxes like this fool over here. I fast twice a week, I tithe a tenth of my income!" Look at me, I'm righteous. Perhaps, in a narrow sense. This seems to be the kind of righteousness that Jesus is always smirking at, making an example of, or confronting with hasty smack talk. It is the kind of righteousness that locates itself in human works, in obeying the rules. Notice the Pharisee makes no mention of God's righteousness, only his own.

Then there's the tax collector, who just by virtue of his

profession is considered a betrayer, a two-faced sinner by most Jews. He takes money from land-owners just trying to make it in Roman occupied territory and gives that money to the empire! And yet this is the man Jesus labels righteous in the parable. The right kind of righteous. Not because the tax collector lives a pious life, but because he isn't above getting on his knees and crying out for God's mercy. The Pharisee exalts his own deeds in prayer, claiming himself righteous. The tax collector gets humble in prayer, claiming God and God alone righteous. And only one gets it according to Jesus. So what's the difference?

It's the thing that the tax-collector has in common with Zechariah and Elizabeth, with John the Baptist, Simeon, the Centurion and Joseph of Arimathea. It's what Luke is obsessed with and trying to teach us again and again throughout the chapters of his Gospel. Righteousness has to do with recognition. Recognition of God. Recognition of God's presence and power among us, in us, outside of us, through us, always renewing us. Recognition of God's glory and grace. Recognition of one's need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Recognition of God's capacity to hold us and heal us and restore hope inside of us. Recognition of God's body in its many forms: strong and sound, broken and dying, tender and vulnerable. Righteousness has to do with recognition, recognition of God. But that's only the first part. Righteousness has to do with recognition and response.

You'll notice that Zechariah and Elizabeth when they recognize in their old age the miracle of John the Baptist's birth, both of them respond with hymns of praise. When Simeon recognizes the Christ child he responds by proclaiming the goodness of God in the House of God for all to hear. And when the Centurion recognizes Jesus' innocence and wrongful murder by the state, he like many political agitators throughout history, responds by proclaiming the corruption of capital punishment. That's what righteous response sounds like. John the Baptist

recognizes the call upon his life and responds by wading into the water and being so radical in his religious commitment that he ends up changing the world forever and dying because of it. Joseph of Arimathea recognizes the divine in a supposed-enemies'-body and responds by taking that body into his hands and tenderly caring for it. The tax collector recognizes that he is a sinner and responds by crying out for God's mercy. That's what righteous response looks like.

Recognition AND response.

Not recognition and response to one's own piety and obedience. Not just recognition and response to laws and books and rules and obligatory salutations. Not just recognition and response to established institutional religion. That's why righteousness is always defined in "some form" or "in a wide sense" because institutional religion's definition of righteousness is always too small and always setting it up so that some people regard themselves more righteous in their self-righteousness and hold others in contempt. Jesus is always kicking that notion in the teeth. Who knows God is bigger than that? Come on in here. Recognition and response to God here, God now or our need for God here and now. In this day. In this place. In your way. In your need for mercy. In your hymn of praise.

Recognition and response. That's Luke's definition of righteousness. Recognition and response.

I think many of us are good at one side of righteousness and not the other. Some of us recognize God or what is good and right. And some of us respond to what is required of us in this life. But I think many who recognize don't respond and many who are responding don't truly recognize. And that's why being child-like is such an incredible illustration of how to keep the two sides of righteousness together. Jesus says in verse 17 "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Receiving the kingdom of God as a little child means recognizing and responding.

A child recognizes (mostly through feeling) its hunger and cries. Not only does a child recognize its own hunger, but a child (without much cognitive development or object awareness capacity) recognizes the source of its nourishment and directs its response there. A child recognizes when it needs to be touched and held and sang to and cooed at. And a child recognizes the source of that comfort and directs its response there. Do we as adults do that? Do we recognize our need for nourishment and direct our response towards God? Do we recognize our hunger for a deeper life? Do we recognize our yearning for touch, for being held, for being taken care of in body and spirit? Do we recognize? Do we respond? Do we direct our response to the Source of our lives?

Or do we tune out or turn away? Or turn toward food or alcohol or pills or gambling or retail therapy or turn toward some other empty soul that'll thrill us in bed for a quick fix? Or do we stay busy so that when we recognize, we don't have the time or space to respond? Or worse: did we learn early on in life that recognition and response don't get you what you need anyway, so why bother with even pretending to notice?

Becoming an adult has its merit. Brings autonomy, greater freedom, greater capacity to impact the world on a large scale. You can care for others in ways that children cannot. So much good about being an adult. But I think somewhere along the line, we can lose sight of or the sound of or the freedom to be righteous. And so Jesus reminds us: be like a child. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Be like a child: recognize and respond. And respond to me. Come to me. Do not stop yourselves or one another. Come to me, all you that are adults and have lost the ear of your hearts. Come to me, all you who are still young but old inside because life is making you grow up too fast. Come to me, all

you who have forgotten that I am your source...

**Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**

**Be like a child. Recognize and respond. Come to me, all of you. Every single one. Amen.**

