

## Pentecost 23

### “Are You Self-Centered OR Are You God-Centered?”

#### Luke 18:9-17

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*

I was thinking about classic toys and games recently. Particularly, I was reading about the “super ball.” Believe it or not, they were mentioned in a devotion I was reading. Do you have fond memories of any of these?

Years ago, they had something that everyone had called a Super Ball. When you bounced the Super Ball on the ground, it would go 30 or 40 feet into the air. It was so cool. I just remember asking, “What makes this Super Ball different from every other ball? How can it bounce so crazy high?”

I found out this week that the Super Ball had a tightly compacted, solid core. That’s what gave the ball its bounce-ability.

So our question for today is this: what is at your core? What is your core value? Core belief?

What are you going to live for? There are all kinds of options. You can center your life around all kinds of things: Career, Sports, Making Money, Family. And there is nothing wrong with any of these things. They’re great, but they make for a lousy center to your life.

You need something at the center of our lives that is absolutely unchanging, something that can never be taken away from you. And if the center of your life might disappear – at any moment –you’ll always be under stress. You’ll always be worried.

When your core is solid in the Lord, you have bounce-ability. Having the crucified and risen Lord at the center of your heart and life means you will Bounce Back from challenges faster. You will Bounce Back from stress and crisis faster. Have the Lord Jesus at the center of your life means more joy, more confidence, more hope.

Our Question for today is this: Are you self-centered OR Are you God-centered? What’s at the core, at the heart of your life?

This is a good question for the 2 guys in the parable that Jesus tells today in Luke 18. It’s a pretty easy story to understand. Two men go to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector.

In that culture, the Pharisee was the good guy. Today, to be called a Pharisee is an insult, you’re being called self-righteous and prideful. But back then Pharisees were the good guys. They were the pious ones, they were dedicated to religious observance, following all of the laws. But this Pharisee made 2 mistakes. 1. He thought he was better than everyone else. He uses the word “I” 5 times. 2. He tried to justify himself. “I’m not like those other bad people. And look at my good works... I fast, I give my offering.” And some commentators suggest that this Pharisee was praying to himself, not to the Lord.

This Pharisee was being self-righteous. He believed that his good works saved him, his good works made him right with God. Oh, it's a trap that we can fall into even today. We can focus on the I, I, I, I, I and forget that we are as sinful and guilty as anyone. "Chief of sinners, though I be..."

What about the other guy? The tax-collector. You know in that culture, this was the dirty, rotten, no-good, tax collector! He'd rob you blind. He would give a little of your hard-earned money to Romans, and then keep the rest for himself. I'll bet that there was no person in all of Israel more hated than this tax collector. Probably no man in all of Israel had done more evil than this tax collector.

And what was HIS PRAYER? "God be merciful to me, a sinner." I'm as bad as I can be. And anybody who heard him pray that way would say, "Amen, brother, you are the worst. Bottom of the barrel."

"God be merciful to me, a sinner." 7 words.

Can we look at that middle word, "merciful"? "Be merciful to me" is the verb form of the noun which means "mercy seat." God be my mercy seat, my seat of mercy. What does this mean?

It's a picture from the Old Testament. Take a look at this painting of the Ark of the Covenant.



Back in the Old Testament, there was the tabernacle. The tabernacle was the portable worship sanctuary where God's people worshiped throughout their years of wandering the wilderness. I

Inside the tabernacle, was the Holy of Holies. Inside the Holy of Holies was a small chest called the Ark of the Covenant (what I have pictured up here.) It was the most holy and sacred object in the Jewish religion.

It was a box, about a yard long and a foot and half wide. In it was a golden pot of manna, Aaron's rod, (reminders of how God had helped them in the past), but also the stone tablets with the law, the 10 commandments etched on them. The law, the standard by which God would judge humanity.

The lid of the Ark of the Covenant was called the MERCY SEAT. Two golden cherubim were on the top of the Mercy Seat, their wings spread over it.

Once per year, on the day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood of the sacrificial animal and sprinkle that blood on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. When he sprinkled the blood on the Mercy Seat, the sins of the people were forgiven for another year. The blood of the sacrificial substitute would turn away God's judgment and He would forgive His people.

So when the tax collector said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" he is saying "be merciful to me, not based on my deeds, but on the basis of the blood shed for me."

He was not self-centered. His request was God-centered.

And at the core of our faith, at the center of what we believe, is the Gospel message that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, His Blood was shed on the cross, the **mercy seat** of God. The blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all sin.

That's what it means to be God-centered. By the blood of Jesus Christ, not by my good deeds, am I justified.

And so Jesus says, "Only the tax collector when home justified, forgiven, because only He was God-centered."



3 Points to take with you today.

**First, God looks at things differently than we do.** Oh, we look on the outside. We profile and judge. But God looks at the heart, the core, what's on the inside. And those who believe in Jesus, those who believe that Christ's death and resurrection gives life, they are forgiven. It's not about the outside.

**Second, the worst sinners OFTEN MAKE the best candidates for salvation.** Why? Because they have been smacked down by life. They look in the mirror and see nothing but sin. God has brought them to their knees, and then He in His grace lifts them up.

When you are knocked down, when life isn't going your way, the first place to start is on your knees. The bulletin cover says it today, "**The one who humbles himself will be exalted.**"

When you are knocked down, **Say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."** He will lift you up.

**Third point, Your only hope is the Lord Jesus Christ. Be God-centered. Be Christ-centered. He is in control of your life and of our world.**

Gang, if there is one phrase that I've heard over and over in the last several weeks it is this, "I can't wait until this election is over!" (All in favor say "aye".) This happens every election cycle, but may more-so this year.

Can I remind us all of something? When we wake up on November 9<sup>th</sup>, no matter who is elected, Jesus is still King of the World. In the midst of all of the changes and chances of this world, Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And our God reigns, our God is in control of human history, and uses it to accomplish His good and gracious will.

What's most important? Are you self-centered or God-centered? Join with the tax collector and say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."