

Nov. 16, 2025  
Contempt of Contempt  
Luke 18:9-14

Our passage today is found in Luke 18:9-14 and in it, Jesus tells a parable addressing the attitude of contempt toward others within religious circles. And as I was sitting with this passage across several days I found myself thinking about contempt, but not just the contempt of others addressed here, but also contempt of self and their interrelation. Both, I think, are temptations for anyone in Christian environments, such as ourselves. So what I want to do this morning is spend a bit of time walking through this passage before extending a bit beyond what we see in this passage in reflecting on this human impulse towards contempt. So our passage begins,

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:” (NIV)

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” (NRSV).

We’re told right away *why* Jesus decides to tell this parable. He decides to tell a story that confronts the pride-in-self combined with contempt-of-others that he is perceiving or observing in people. He confronts the mentality that says “I am better than [fill in the blank]”. A mentality that continues to be present today, even in us at times if we’re honest I think.

We can see it between races and cultures, between genders and orientations, between countries and within countries, with political affiliations, etc. And we can see it between and within religions. Specific to this passage, Jesus addresses this mentality in the religious sphere. The pride in oneself and contempt of others as a result of morality and religious observance. There is a strong temptation for any religious or spiritual person to compare our righteousness to that of others, as if we’re competing against each other for God’s approval. Pride in self and contempt of others often shows up in religious spaces. Jesus saw it in his time and so decided to confront it in this parable.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”

We have 2 seekers of God here. One is a Pharisee and is set up as the insider of the faith, a pious person. The other, a tax collector, is the outsider, an impious person. But both are approaching God in prayer.

I wonder if it is significant that we're told the Pharisee stood by himself. He separates himself even physically. Perhaps the physical separation representing the separation in piety and righteousness in their mind.

But either way, the Pharisee stands by himself and begins praying, thanking God that he is not like so many other sinful people in the world who steal, who cheat, who do evil things. And he thanks God that he is not like the person joining him in the temple, the tax collector. He is better than them in his observance of religious practices, his righteousness, his morality.

Now, of course it's good that this Pharisee wasn't someone who was stealing from others, cheating on their spouse, doing other evil things. It was good that they were pursuing righteousness in these actions.

But we see in Jesus' ministry that he is quite concerned with not just our actions, as important as they are, but our attitudes and motivations as well. If we think of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, Jesus addresses actions such as murder and adultery, focusing not just on the action but on the mindset, the attitude that leads to these actions. He then talks about spiritual practices like prayer, fasting, tithing, and speaks to the attitude that a person has as they engage in these practices.

Jesus seemed to be saying that "yes, your actions are important...but so are your thoughts, your attitudes, your motivations."

It brings to my mind principles of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy where focus is given to the connection between thoughts and behaviors. There is something people call the Cognitive Triangle (PIC) that represents this idea that our feelings, our thoughts, and our behaviors all affect one another and need to be taken into account in the therapeutic setting.

So I see in this parable and in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount this recognition that thoughts, feelings, attitudes, are of vital importance because they will affect our behaviors. It was great that this Pharisee was trying to avoid harmful actions...but the attitude of thinking they were better than the other person, seeing the other with contempt...that needed to be addressed. Sooner or later that attitude will show up in actions unless it is recognized and addressed.

He continues, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

Again, I see the physical placement of the character to be noteworthy. The Tax Collector stands far off. Perhaps they don't feel worthy to even draw physically close. And then they won't even look up but instead just beats their breast and prays for mercy.

And Jesus closes the story by stating, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

So as I sat with this passage I noticed tension within me. On one hand I deeply appreciate it. It is a short and simple story where one character is pitted against the other as worthy of our emulation. [OPEN: Who should we emulate?] We're called to be more like the tax collector than the Pharisee and excessive pride in ourselves and contempt for others, something that is all too common in Christian circles, is called out, confronted. I deeply appreciate that. It is a reminder all religious people, including us, need.

But the tension I feel comes from the fact that this passage *could* be used to encourage a level of self-contempt, self-loathing...that I get uncomfortable with. And I'm not saying that is what the passage literally does necessarily. But I think this passage and others can and have been used that way.

We're invited to emulate the Tax Collector. And what do we see them doing? We see them standing at a distance, not drawing too close. We see them unwilling to even look to God, keeping their eyes down. We see them beating their breast, an act of mourning for their sin. And their prayer is simple: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

By the tax collector's actions and posture it's possible to read this and come away with a justification for or an encouragement to self-contempt and shame. This attitude can be common for people in the Church. Therapist Andrew Bauman talks about Christian's propensity to confuse self-contempt with humility ([Self-Contempt as Addiction - The Allender Center](#)) and talks about his own internalized self-contempt as a result of Christian teachings, stating his past belief that "my shame was deeper than my salvation. My sin, my darkness, was truer than my glory." ([When Shame is Deeper than Salvation - The Allender Center](#)).

Now, I want to be careful here and try to be as clear as I can on a couple fronts about what I am *NOT* saying. So one thing I am *not* saying or doing is I am not denying the reality of sin, the fact that we each sin, or the need to address sin. Our Confession of Faith states things like:

"We confess that...humanity has disobeyed God...chosen to sin." (p. 31)

"We sin by making individual and group choices to do unrighteousness and injustice. We sin by omitting to do good and neglecting to give God the glory due our Creator and Redeemer." (p. 31).

I agree. So I'm not denying the reality of sin. And, in fact, the words of the tax collector's prayer, in themselves, I think are beautiful in their simplicity and honesty and applicability for all of us. "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

But, at the same time, in our sin-focus I think as Christians we have often encouraged a degree of self-contempt and shame, that I would argue isn't only 'unbiblical' but also extremely unhealthy.

And, full transparency, this may just be my own little soapbox issue, something I take particular issue with because of my own story. But, I also know that my

experience isn't only unique to me which is why I want to speak to it. Here's what I mean.

Part of my faith journey has included a deep-seated belief that God is a powerful, ever-watching, quick-to-anger Judge. An omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent Being who is watching my every action, thought, and impulse waiting for me to sin, which I inevitably do, so they can pounce with judgment and punishment. This view has resulted at times in shame, self-loathing, an unhealthy fear of God, and has contributed to a diagnosis of Scrupulosity. I know that is not a common term so let me explain. Scrupulosity is also known as religious OCD. In OCD, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, there is an obsession, uncontrollable and recurring thoughts, and then there are compulsions, repetitive behaviors we engage in as a way to deal with the obsessions, keep the anxiety at bay. We may typically think of OCD as perhaps someone who is obsessed with germs (that is the Obsessive part), so then they engage in compulsive repetitive behaviors like washing hands constantly as a way to combat the obsessive thoughts (that's the Compulsion part). In the case of scrupulosity or religious OCD, the obsession, at least in my case, is with sin and judgment. The obsessive thoughts are concerning whether I have sinned in some way, some action or thought or impulse, known or unknown, that goes against God's will and will add to the case that I deserve damnation. So to combat these obsessive thoughts, the compulsive behavior is continual examination of conscience to see if I have sinned in some way and then continual prayers of confession. At its worst, this was mentally paralyzing and dominated my faith experience.

Now, recognizing this as a psychological condition, recognizing others deal with it, receiving therapy and medication has all resulted in improvement in this area. But one of the lasting results of this in my life is a sensitivity toward any religious teaching that I think may contribute to this unhealthy understanding of God and self and may result in or encourage self-contempt, self-loathing or shame.

And to be clear, I don't equate shame and guilt. To acknowledge that I am guilty of sin is not the same as shame. Guilt has to do with action, shame with identity. Some explain the difference as guilt being 'I did something wrong, something bad' and shame being a belief that 'I am wrong, I am bad.'

So I can appreciate the Tax Collector's prayer as an acknowledgment of sin, an acknowledgment of their need for God's mercy. I appreciate this for them and for each of us.

But if this or other passages are used, either explicitly or implicitly, to justify and encourage self-contempt, rather than simply a healthy humility, then I get uncomfortable for both theological and psychological reasons.

Theological reasons.

Some have said that by proof-texting you can make the Bible say almost anything you want, justify almost anything you want. And I think that is probably true. And I cannot deny that there are stand-alone verses and passages that we can turn to in order to argue that it is God's will for us to adopt an attitude of hatred and contempt for ourselves as nothing but sinners rotten to the core from the beginning. I can use today's passage to argue for that.

But just because you *can* argue that, is that what God's intention or desire is? Is that we are meant to take from the Bible as a whole? Because you don't have to get there from Scripture. I remember when I was pastoring in Lanigan, being challenged by a couple I greatly respected, that the Bible begins with Genesis 1, not Genesis 3. By that, they meant that it's important to remember that God's word to us begins with original blessing, original goodness, not 'original sin'. The Bible begins with a story about creation and the author tells us that God said all of creation was 'very good', including humanity. The biblical story starts with that. Yes, sin comes into the picture...but perhaps we've overemphasized 'original sin' and underemphasized 'original goodness'?

And there are other passages, especially with Jesus, where I think we see the inherent dignity and value of humanity being communicated even as the reality of sin is acknowledged. I think of the adulterous woman in John 8 who others want to stone for her sin, or the 'sinful' woman in Luke 7 who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and Jesus steps in with love, forgiveness, grace for them. I think it's important to look beyond any one specific passage when reading the Bible and see what else is said.

Numerous theologians throughout Christian history have also pushed back against this Christian tendency and teaching toward self-loathing. Bishop Kallistos Ware of the Eastern Orthodox Church, in their book, *The Orthodox Way*, states, "The Orthodox tradition, without minimizing the effects of the fall, does not however believe that it resulted in a 'total depravity', such as the Calvinists assert in their more pessimistic moments. The divine image in [humanity] was obscured but not obliterated....Even in a fallen world [humans are] still capable of generous self-sacrifice and loving compassion. Even in a fallen world [humanity] still retains some knowledge of God and can enter by grace into communion with him." (pp. 61-62).

Or, within Celtic Christianity, John Philip Newell, in their book, *The Book of Creation*, states,

"Sin has buried the beauty of God's image, but not erased it. The gospel is given to uncover the hidden wealth of God that has been planted in the depths of our human nature." (p. xvii).

So many say 'yes' to the reality of sin and that each of us has and does sin and we need to acknowledge and deal with it, but also 'yes' to the reality that sin is the not

the first or last or only word about us as humans and does not necessitate self-contempt. I could go on but all this is to say that there are theological and biblical reasons I would caution anyone against using our passage today or other passages to adopt an attitude of self-contempt, rather than humility, which too often happens.

Psychological reasons.

I am fascinated by the field of mental/emotional health and what we can learn from it that coincides with and impacts our faith and our understanding of Scripture and sheds light on how we can pursue and experience the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives, the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control that God desires.

I don't think it will come as a surprise that self-contempt is associated with psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, shame, self-harm, suicidality, and even physical problems such as increased risk of heart disease, disturbed sleep, compromised immune function ([Self Criticism: Understanding the Effects & Overcoming](#); [Full article: Evaluation of expressed self-contempt in psychotherapy: an exploratory study](#); [Self-Contempt as a Predictor of Suicidality: A Longitudinal Study | Request PDF](#)). In fact, a study was done that analyzed people's brains and found that low self-esteem results in 'reduced grey matter volume in brain regions that contribute to emotion/stress regulation.' ([The Self-Liking Brain: A VBM Study on the Structural Substrate of Self-Esteem - PMC](#)). This means, in the words of another author referring to this study, that "if you feel negatively about yourself, the brain regions that help you control emotions and stress have less gray matter than someone with a greater degree of self-acceptance—that is, these regions actually have less tissue to 'work with.'" ([Greater self-acceptance improves emotional well-being - Harvard Health](#)). Self-contempt can actually negatively affect your brain structure. That is very different 'fruit' than we see in Gal. 5 with the Fruit of the Spirit.

Now, I again feel the need to make clear what I am *NOT* saying. I am not arguing that if we follow God, all will or should go well for us all the time. That we will always experience love, joy, and peace and if we're not, if instead we're experiencing depression, anxiety, self-contempt, then that means we're unspiritual in some way, don't have enough faith, God is not with us, etc. I am not arguing a health and wealth or prosperity gospel message here. The world is a broken place and all people, Christ-followers included, experience difficulty and suffering. And in fact, following in the ways of Jesus will, at times, *necessitate* sacrifice, denial of self, difficult choices and hard experiences. I am not denying any of that. And struggling, experiencing difficult things and not joy or peace at any given time is *not* evidence that the Spirit of God is not present with you.

But I am saying that if some of our Christian teaching or interpretations of the Bible directly contributes to things like self-contempt and all that it is associated with (depression, suicidality, etc.) If a Christian teaching leads directly opposite of the Fruit of the Spirit, I think we should rightly question if those teachings are of God. Referencing my previous sermon, if a particular teaching or interpretation of Scripture ultimately leads us away from the Fruit of the Spirit, we should stop and ponder ‘why is that?’

So pushing back against an interpretation of Scripture that would encourage self-contempt, I would argue that self-compassion and self-acceptance are more aligned with the Fruit of the Spirit and provide a better road towards experiencing God and blessing the world. Practicing self-compassion is associated with reduced anxiety, reduced depression, increased life satisfaction, greater ability to cope with stress. That sounds more like the love, the joy, the peace, the goodness that Galatians refers to. Further, other psychologists argue that ‘successful’ therapy/healing, at least in part depends on the client experiencing the therapist as empathetic, communicating respect and unconditional positive regard, and affirming their self-worth (John C. Norcross, *The Heart & Soul of Change*, p. 123). Approaching a person in that posture contributes to their healing. If that is true for how a therapist approaches a client, I would argue that is also true for how we approach ourselves, others, and even how God approaches us.

So I recognize I’ve gone on for a while here and want to wrap up. Jesus tells this parable confronting the excessive pride-in-self and contempt-for-others that he saw. And we can learn from this passage that humility is called for and we’re encouraged to healthy humility elsewhere in Scripture (see Php. 2). We can learn that there is no room for contempt toward others as we follow Jesus. But even if it isn’t made explicit in this passage, I would extend our takeaway to say that humility is not the same as self-contempt even if you may have felt or learned that to be the case. And I would say the rejection of contempt, our contempt of contempt, should extend not just to others but also to ourselves. In fact, I would say they are linked. When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is he says first, ‘Love God.’ But then adds “Love your neighbor *as yourself*.” (Mk. 12:31). Love others in the way you love yourself. I think this is more than a command. I think this is also a recognition that these are linked in some way. Self-contempt not only harms ourselves, I think it impacts and hinders our ability to love others and live as a blessing to the world.

So I pray that we may we have eyes to see, minds and hearts to understand that each of us, each person, is beloved by God, created in the image of God and created for relationship with this God of love who does not treat us with contempt nor do they want us to treat each other or ourselves with contempt but rather love, acceptance, grace, and humility.

**Benediction:**

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May we, in words from Ephesians 3, be rooted and established in love. May we have power, together with all God's people, to grasp and know how wide and long and high and deep Christ's love for each us is. May we see each person, including ourselves, with the eyes of love and compassion through which Creator sees us. May we go forth and live not with contempt but with grace, love, and acceptance.