

## Powerless Misery of Trusting Ourselves

Luke 18:9-17

**Introduction:** In a recent article for *Together for the Gospel*, Trevin Wax examined the foundation issues associated with *the gospel of self fulfillment*.<sup>1</sup> He keyed off a recent story of a popular Christian blogger and author named Glennon Doyle Melton (who has 645,000 followers on social media) who recently announced that her divorce was final and she has a new partner, “my person” – former Olympic soccer player Abby Wambach.<sup>2</sup> This was not a moment of either catharsis or sorrow, but of celebration and call to acceptance, since this was an expression of one’s true, authentic self. Wax goes on to explain the gospel of self-fulfillment as one of *expressive individualism*:

*“According to this way of thinking, the goal of life is to discover and **express your unique sense of self, no matter what others may say or do to challenge your freedom of personality.** The narrative arc of your life is finding your personal route to happiness by following your heart, expressing your true self, and then fighting whoever would oppose you --- your society, your family, your past, or your church.”*

This way of thinking is nothing new, yet it is continuing to pervade our culture at a rapid pace. It is a “gospel” where self is on the throne, where the belief that human flourishing is a result of obeying our desires (which is really enslavement), and the thinking that the greatest gift one can give God and the world is being our true, *authentic self*, even if that violates the clear commands of God’s Word. This is all done in the name of love, God, joy, and many other Christian words. Wax goes on to identify this as a Christian counterfeit.

*‘The religious form of expressive individualism imagines the believer wrestling against the bondage of their past, or the expectations of their parents, or the legalistic regulations of their church. God’s rescue frees us from all these chains, and sets us on a journey to discover our true essence, which we then offer up as a gift to God and the world. Our goal is to become all that God has created us to be. Anything that gets in the way of this journey must be an evil barrier, overcome only through personal faith and reliance on Jesus.*

Biblical terms are redefined: sin is failing to reach personal potential; shame is a subjective feeling you bring on yourself and must be put aside, not a state that results from objective sin against God; guilt is failure to accept or love yourself, and any barriers that stand in your way must come down. Today’s **gospel of self-fulfillment** is simply **self trust brought to a logical conclusion, self love finding an outlet, and a new form of self-righteousness given a platform.** Jesus addressed these issues when He addressed those who trusted themselves for righteousness. In doing He not only exposed the fact that self trust does not lead to salvation, its actually powerless to deliver on its promises. We will examine a parable and a teaching that displays the counter to self-trust: *a broken dependency on God for mercy.*

**Marks of Self Trust:** *How do we know when it’s happening?*

<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/trevinwax/2016/11/28/dont-settle-for-the-gospel-of-self-fulfillment/>

<sup>2</sup> She explained to her Facebook followers that she “is in love” and “really, deeply happy” and insisted that the “most revolutionary thing a woman can do is not explain herself.” She pled with her blog readers, as they absorbed the news of her divorce, to “think deeply about the chasm-wide difference between leaving a man and leaving God. Please remember that when a woman leaves, she just brings God with her. Nothing separates a woman or a family from God’s love. Not death, and certainly not divorce.”<sup>2</sup> Jen Pollach Michel, Christianity Today, “Glennon Doyle Melton’s Gospel of Self-Fulfillment”

**Luke 18:9** He also told this parable to some who **trusted in themselves that they were righteous**, and **treated others with contempt**:

Luke graciously fills in with Spirit filled commentary as to the nature of the parable Jesus was about to teach. The issue is straightforward: He addresses those who trusted themselves rather than God for righteousness and responded to others with contempt. There are three components of thinking to identify here if we are going to root out **self-trust** in our life: how we view God, ourselves, and others.

### **Examining the way we view God**

**God exists to help/aid me** – Self-trust is willing to acknowledge that God exists and is there, but He specifically is there when I need Him, want Him, or desire something from Him. He is handy to have around, since He can give me what I ask for.

**God is there, but subservient to me** – God is there, He has some power, but He is not ultimate in my universe. He is not worthy to be praised, not to be submitted to, and should yield to my desires. If He does not do what I ask, He has very little use to me. My life is not about magnifying Him, He exists to magnify me.

### **Examining the way we view ourselves**

**Points to externals & accomplishment** – It makes sense that those who have ultimate trust in themselves for righteousness, happiness, satisfaction, or anything else count on their actions to back up their belief. A self-trusting person is always quick to point to works done, to how much they've given, and what things they are passionate about

**Outwardly impressive** – Remember, any self-trusting person will not only point to externals, they will point to *impressive credentials*. This was Paul in Philippians 3:4-6 who pointed out his passion, zeal, training, and service record. What we can accomplish is viewed as more important than what God has done.

**Believe we are inherently good** – The baseline belief in self-trust is in self-goodness. Though there may be an acknowledgement of sin in general, this will be relative and not specific. Because a self-trusting person is the standard of good, others who are different are deemed as bad – and there are a lot of bad people. Inherently good people don't need saving, they need help, a nudge every once in a while, or more time. This is the damning belief of the self-trusting

**Ultimately hypocritical & unsustainable** – When external, artificial standards are set up by an individual or community as the measure of goodness, it creates an outflow of hypocrisy since NO ONE can measure up or sustain the standard itself. In today's culture that is why we fight for people's **right's** rather than what is **RIGHT**. If I fight for yours and my rights, we both can ultimately do what we want without violating something that is foundationally right, meaning we do what we want without guilt, shame, or judgment.

### **Examining the way we view others**

**Driven by pride** – So we treat others, especially those different, as "if of no account" If others stand in the way of my happiness or point out my inconsistency, they must be marginalized and silenced.

**Condescension** – Since the self-trusting person sees the worst in others and best in yourself, those who believe or do differently are “worse” or something attached with an “ism” or “phobe”.

**No room for loving others** – Self love sees others as enemies or roadblocks, especially those who disagree. Because self trust is wrapped up in self-love, there is no way to love those who are different, or hard, or are potentially enemies.

Now it should fairly clear at this point why self-trust is so dangerous and devoid of the true gospel. So Jesus gives a vivid picture through a parable of two men who went to the Temple to pray (most likely the 3pm afternoon prayer time). One was an insider who knew the lingo and everyone expected was close to God and whose life reflected that belief. The other was an outsider, a turncoat, one who repulsed the Jewish people and not welcome in their normal worship settings. As Jesus often did, the story did not turn out the way it was supposed to, with one going home justified and the other with only Himself to cling to. The question for us: *who do we identify with? Not who you wish to be, but which person categorizes you right now?*

### **Counter to Self Trust:** *How do we replace it?*

**Luke 18:10-14** "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

<sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' <sup>13</sup> 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!' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

### **Prayer of the self righteous**

We've talked at length about the Pharisees, but they were the insiders insider, the ones who created protocol and set the standard. If anyone knew the right words to pray in the Temple, if there was anyone whose example people would follow, if there was anyone who was righteous, it was these guys. As the afternoon prayer time began, in strides a confident man, dressed in regalia of long robes, flowing tassels, a big box on his forehead, and leather straps around his arms. It would have been a sight to see, and was only outdone by the volume at which he prayed. Notice a few marks of his prayer:

- **God is acknowledged, but merely a passive participant** – the emphasis was not on the greatness of God, but on the greatness of the man praying. He had arrived at a point of righteousness that he was no longer radically dependent on God, but God was there simply to help.
- **An overwhelming focus on one pronoun: “I”** – The text reads that this man “stood by himself”, but can easily be translated “stood and prayed to himself”. He was the subject line and object. Notice the use of the term “I”, which shows his emphasis and point
- **A recitation of good works and accomplishments** – Since this was a public prayer it would help if everyone present heard how awesome he was. The Law called for one fast a week, he did TWO. There were specific tithes to give, but he tithed on EVERYTHING (like gift cards and birthday presents!). He was not just accomplished, he was the best.
- **A “righteousness by comparison” prayer** – False humility shows itself in pointing out ones goodness relative to others. I'm not as bad as these *really bad people*, and especially this **TAX COLLECTOR** in the corner (at which he would pause his prayer to make sure everyone saw the

comparison). God should be thankful to have such a good, righteous, and worthy person in the fold, and its good that everyone knew it. This prayer was the **epitome of self-trust**, believing in his own goodness for his standing before God.

### Prayer of the broken

In stark comparison was a tax collector who had wandered into the Temple to pray, trying to fly below the radar and catch no one in the eye. He was far off from the crowd, was not praying to be heard by others, and was simply hoping to be heard by God. Notice the makeup of this man's prayer:

- **Eyes looking down, not up** – In the picture, one could easily see the Pharisee praying loudly with his chin up in the air, speaking to God as an equal or at least one who could easily be looked at in the eye. By contrast, the tax collector could not lift his gaze up to heaven. This mimicked the penitent phrases of the younger brother in Luke 15 and the story of the prodigal God. The younger brother, when *he came to his senses*, went back to his Father stating, "I've sinned against you and heaven and am no longer worthy to be your son." This posture of prayer happens when we get a full picture of who God really is, His holiness, His glory, righteousness, and our unworthiness. When that happens, our only recourse is to look down.
- **Beating his chest** – The Pharisee's prayer was full of self aggrandizing statements, pointing to himself and "beating his chest" by boasting in himself. The tax collector beat his chest in a way that showed his shame, his guilt, and acknowledgment of his condition before God. Now, it is imperative to remember we do not stay in this position. We do not make ourselves acceptable to God through self-inflicted wounds. This is another form of pride and self-trust. But the emphasis here is not the attempt to persuade God to acceptance, it is a simple acknowledgment of where he stood.
- **God, be merciful (or propitiate) to me, THE sinner** – Two things jump out of the page in this phrase. **First**, the call for mercy. The word here carries with it the normal idea of mercy, which is NOT receiving what one deserves. But the word also carries with it the idea of *propitiation*, or the idea of an atoning work to make one acceptable. The tax collector **knew** his condition was desperate and could do nothing to earn back favor from God, so his prayer was far from elaborate. It was a simple and clear pleading for mercy. The **second** had to do with the acknowledgment as a sinner. The ESV translates this phrase as **a sinner**, but Luke uses the definite article before the word "sinner", which reinforces the identity of the word. This man was not simply acknowledging sin in general (the Pharisee would have done that), but the fact that **he himself was THE sinner in view**. This is both the starting place of salvation and the ending place of sanctification. We are saved when we understand our personal, offensive, wrath-yielding sin before God, and continue to recognize our sin before God each day. This is where one of these men understood the nature of salvation in God alone, and the other sought salvation in himself.

### God's response and expectation

Notice the ironic twist to the story, as Jesus so often gave His disciples. A common observer would have heard these two prayers, one a seminary level prayer filled with the right words, obedience to the Law, and lip-service acknowledgement of God and think this was a good prayer, heard, received, and responded to by God. The tax collector offered a short prayer that was lacking any panache or Biblical reference, and simply for the fact that he was a sinner, would have thought his prayer would not have been answered. Yet Jesus gives the opposite. The tax collector prayed out of **humble brokenness**, while the Pharisee out of **self trusting exaltation**.

### Why is this comparison so important for us?

- **Salvation is to the humble and broken, not the self-trusting** - Jesus made it clear throughout the book of Luke: He came as a physician to heal the sick, a savior to call sinner to repentance not righteous (Luke 5:31-32) and to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Salvation is coming to an end of ourselves, to realize we can do nothing to save ourselves, and that all of our striving cannot give us what we hope for. Only those who know how sick they really are can reach out to Christ for salvation.
- **Self-trust will lead to misery, not happiness** - Believing that if we could only do what we've always wanted, live out all of our desires, and unleash our passions that we'd finally be happy is as foolish as a child believing that eating candy all the time will make them healthy. Words like "vulnerability, honesty, and authenticity" have become code words for living out openly selfish lives. These qualities, without humble repentance, still lead to death. Some will dispute whether they are truly miserable at the end of the road of self-love and satisfaction. However, we can be deceived and deluded into thinking anything, like a child who eats mudpies instead of a banquet table of excellent food and passing them off as "earthy and gritty....so good." There is not only eternal misery at the end, but temporal misery where satisfaction is never found.
- **Self-Trust misunderstands the place of good works** - Self trust points to good works to prove inherent goodness of self. A broken, humble believer points to good works to prove the majesty and worth of their Savior. Self trust banks on good works for the sustaining of ones goodness, where a humble believer points to the Savior for anything good, and simply seeks to please and glorify Him. Think about this in terms of serving our community or even our commitment to God's church. A self-trusting person will point to these things as means of their goodness and righteousness, where a believer would say these are simply outflows of a relationship with Christ and seeking to please Him in all things.
- **Self-Trust offers no power in the midst of sorrow and suffering** - Life never turns out the way we thought. We do not project that we will have an auto-immune disease, or have a wayward child, or experience loss or death early, or have continual pain, or be sinned against in an personally damaging way. If life was about temporal happiness alone, in a definition of happiness that is devoid of sorrow and suffering, then it would be easy to dismiss God, move out on our own, and do it our own way. When we understand that there is great power in brokenness and humility, we realize that seeking to glorify God in the midst of these twin realities is a pathway to joy and happiness, not a roadblock to them. God is NOT OPPOSED to our happiness. He simply brings it in an eternal and ultimate way. He is "**preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison**" that comes out of "slight momentary affliction (2 Cor. 4:17). When we seek to glorify God and live in light of His glory, we realize there is joy in the midst of suffering by entrusting ourselves to a God who loved us enough to die in our place, the same God who works out all things to His glory and our ultimate good. God is not making mistakes but causing us to rely on Him more and glorying in our weakness.

### **Denial of Self Trust:** *How do we learn to deny ourselves?*

**Luke 18:15-17** Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

### God's acceptance of the helpless

As Jesus was speaking, some were bringing their infants to Him, a custom of having a Rabbi say a blessing over their children. Jesus obliged since He loves kids! The disciples were indignant for Jesus' sake, thinking that this was a waste of time and a hindrance to their more important mission. Jesus was quick to remind them to let the children (infants - toddlers) come to Him, because the Kingdom belongs to these. The Kingdom is open to all, the helpless and weak, not those the world would expect (the strong, powerful, successful, etc.)

### Our reception as the helpless

There was a second powerful statement that He made regarding children. He said that everyone who would enter the Kingdom of the future would have to receive it like a child. A child at this age is **totally dependent on their parent for life, sustenance, and identity**. A child cries out knowing that their parent will come. Even when a child disobeys, they don't want to be disconnected from their family. That is why kids have a hard time going in nursery at times, and why my daughters thought they would live in our house forever and get married to me. They couldn't imagine a different life. Children believe what their parents say because they are willing to trust implicitly.

Jesus describes this not only as the gateway to the kingdom, but the **antidote of self-trust**. Growth in grace and maturity means we never move away from the childlike faith and awe that we have in God. Even though we grow in knowledge and an awareness of the complexity of life, we come back to the simplicity of trusting God at His Word, knowing that our Dad is the toughest, strongest, and most kind dad there is.

### Conclusion:

So the question this morning: **who do you identify with, the Pharisee or tax collector?** I'd venture to say we'd all like to say "tax collector", but our natural drift is to that of the self-trusting Pharisee. Trevin Wax concluded his article on the gospel of self-fulfillment this way:

*Now, before you readers who agree with me nod your heads too vigorously, let me hold up a mirror. It would be silly and irresponsible to speak about this expressive individualistic philosophy leading to sexual hedonism as if it were just a problem out there, with those people. And it would be the height of hypocrisy to think that this is an issue primarily for our LGBT friends and neighbors, but not for the rest of the church.*

*In fact, I would say that one of the primary reasons why so many in the LGBT community think that Christian opposition to same-sex relationships is motivated by fear, hate, or personal disdain is precisely because they see what we do not. They see just how expansive is our own dedication to expressive individualism, this idea that we are to cast off restraints, find ourselves, discover our path to happiness and be free.*

*When churches sanction expressive individualism everywhere else (money, marriage, sexuality, career path, and so on) but draw the line at same-sex relationships, it does indeed look like we are singling out homosexuality as "the sin above all sins." You may be closer to the gospel of self-fulfillment than you think.*

If this is the case, our response is important. Do we recognize our personal sin before God, our need for mercy, and the joy of child-like faith? Or are we trying to still do it on our own, finding our own happiness in our own way. There is only misery down that path, a lineup of mudpies, when God offers a banquet feast of joy in Christ.