

Psalm 145 and Luke 18:9-14

12th Sunday after Pentecost. August 16, 2026.

Texts from the NRSVUE Bible. According with *Un giorno una parola* lectionary.

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Psalm 145

Praise. Of David.

¹*I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.*

²*Every day I will bless you
and praise your name forever and ever.*

³*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.*

⁴*One generation shall extol your works to another
and shall declare your mighty acts.*

⁵*They will recount the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works I will meditate.*

⁶*They will proclaim the might of your awesome deeds,
and I will declare your greatness.*

⁷*They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.*

⁸*The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹*The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

¹⁰*All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.*

¹¹*They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
and tell of your power,*

¹²*to make known to all people your mighty deeds
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*

¹³*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*

*The Lord is faithful in all his words
and gracious in all his deeds.*

¹⁴*The Lord upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.*

¹⁵*The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.*

¹⁶*You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.*
¹⁷*The Lord is just in all his ways
and kind in all his doings.*
¹⁸*The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.*
¹⁹*He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry and saves them.*
²⁰*The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.*
²¹*My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.*

Luke 18:9-14

⁹*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Notes for the sermon

In reading this text we should first consider its literary form: Luke explicitly calls it a parable (18:9), following immediately on the parable of the unjust judge (18:1-8) and Luke’s recurring use of the device throughout the Gospel (e.g. 15:3; 19:11). A parable is therefore a narrative loosely built on a real setting (the Temple), real actions (two men went up to pray), and stock characters (a Pharisee and a tax collector), whose purpose is to sharpen the hearer’s understanding rather than to report an event. A parable is a story, but the weight falls on the meaning of the facts, not on the facts themselves.¹

A second point worth pondering is the presumed intention of the writer. Luke states his own aim at the outset of the Gospel: to set down an orderly account of what was “handed down” by eyewitnesses and “servants of the word” (Luke 1:1-4) — already the voice of an evangelist compiling tradition. Is he reporting a teaching of the historical Jesus, the itinerant Jewish rabbi, or transmitting a revelation of the risen Christ mediated through the post-Easter community? This is essentially the distinction form criticism draws between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of the kerygma.”² The two readings are not identical: they yield two related but distinct kinds of wisdom. This is a general remark raised by Jewish commentators: God says many

¹See Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. 1963, on the parable form generally, and pp. 139–144 on this parable in particular.

²Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, 1892; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 1934.

different things *at the same time*.³

In working through this, we should distinguish several possible receptions. Is it about the class friction between Pharisees and tax collectors, a conflict Luke returns to repeatedly (5:27-32; 7:34; 15:1-2; 19:1-10)?⁴ Is it about how to pray, echoing the parables of the friend at midnight and the unjust judge that frame it on either side (11:5-13; 18:1-8)? Is it about sin and justification, anticipating Paul's own vocabulary of being "justified by faith" apart from works (Romans 3:20-28; Galatians 2:16)? Or is it a positive teaching on the right conduct of the believer — of a piece with the reversal "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11; Matthew 23:12) — or a piece of wisdom about the human condition, in the vein of Ecclesiastes' skepticism about anyone's claim to be righteous (Ecclesiastes 7:20)?

John Calvin's comment, reproduced below, focuses on the theme of justification. I am personally drawn instead to two themes already sounded in today's Psalm: the theme of prayer and God's answer to it (Psalm 145:18-19), and the theme of God's providential agency within his own creation (Psalm 145:15-16).

Appendix: John Calvin's Commentary on Luke 18:9–14 (Harmony of the Evangelists)

9. And he spoke also this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. Christ now gives directions about another virtue, which is necessary to acceptable prayer. Believers must not come into the presence of God but with humility and abasement. No disease is more dangerous than arrogance; and yet all have it so deeply fixed in the marrow of their bones, that it can scarcely be removed or extirpated by any remedy. It is no doubt strange that men should be so mad as to venture to raise their crests against God, and to plead their own merits before him. Though men are carried away by their ambition, yet when we come into the presence of God, all presumption ought to be laid aside; and yet every man thinks that he has sufficiently humbled himself, if he only presents a hypocritical prayer for forgiveness. Hence we infer that this warning which our Lord gives was far from being unnecessary.

There are two faults at which Christ glances, and which he intended to condemn — wicked confidence in ourselves, and the pride of despising brethren, the one of which springs out of the other. It is impossible that he who deceives himself with vain confidence should not lift himself up above his brethren. Nor is it wonderful that it should be so; for how should that man not despise his equals, who vaunts against God himself? Every man that is puffed up with self-confidence carries on open war with God, to whom we cannot be reconciled in any other way than by denial of ourselves; that is, by laying aside all confidence in our own virtue and righteousness, and relying on his mercy alone.

10. Two men went up. Christ makes a comparison between the two men, both of whom, by going up to pray, seem to manifest the same ardour of piety, while yet they are exceedingly unlike. The Pharisee, possessing outward sanctity, approaches to God with a commendation which he

³Cf. the rabbinic principle *elu ve-elū divrei Elohim chayim*, "these and these are the words of the living God" — b. Eruvin 13b; see also b. Chagigah 3b.

⁴On the social and economic standing of tax collectors relative to the Pharisaic movement, see John R. Donahue, "Tax Collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971): 39–61, and Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (1969), 110–119.

pronounces on his whole life, and as if he had an undoubted right to offer the sacrifice of praise. The publican, on the other hand, as if he had been some outcast, and knew that he was unworthy to approach, presents himself with trembling and with humble confession. Christ affirms that the Pharisee was rejected, and that the prayers of the publican were acceptable to God. The reasons why the Pharisee was rejected are stated to be these two: he trusted in himself that he was righteous, and despised others.

11. God, I thank thee. And yet he is not blamed for boasting of the strength of his free-will, but for trusting that God was reconciled to him by the merits of his works. For this thanksgiving, which is presented exclusively in his own name, does not at all imply that he boasted of his own virtue, as if he had obtained righteousness from himself, or merited any thing by his own industry. On the contrary, he ascribes it to the grace of God that he is righteous. Now though his thanksgiving to God implies an acknowledgment, that all the good works which he possessed were purely the gift of God, yet as he places reliance on works, and prefers himself to others, himself and his prayer are alike rejected. Hence we infer that men are not truly and properly humbled, though they are convinced that they can do nothing, unless they likewise distrust the merits of works, and learn to place their salvation in the undeserved goodness of God, so as to rest upon it all their confidence.

This is a remarkable passage; for some think it enough if they take from man the glory of good works, so far as they are the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and accordingly they admit that we are justified freely, because God finds in us no righteousness but what he bestowed. But Christ goes farther, not only ascribing to the grace of the Spirit the power of acting aright, but stripping us of all confidence in works; for the Pharisee is not blamed on the ground of claiming for himself what belongs to God, but because he trusts to his works, that God will be reconciled to him, because he deserves it. Let us therefore know that, though a man may ascribe to God the praise of works, yet if he imagines the righteousness of those works to be the cause of his salvation, or rests upon it, he is condemned for wicked arrogance. And observe, that he is not charged with the vainglorious ambition of those who indulge in boasting before men, while they are inwardly conscious of their own wickedness, but is charged with concealed hypocrisy; for he is not said to have been the herald of his own praises, but to have prayed silently within himself. Though he did not proclaim aloud the honour of his own righteousness, his internal pride was abominable in the sight of God. His boasting consists of two parts: first, he acquits himself of that guilt in which all men are involved; and, secondly, he brings forward his virtues. He asserts that he is not as other men, because he is not chargeable with crimes which everywhere prevail in the world.

12. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. This is equivalent to saying that he performed more than the law required; just as the Popish monks talk loftily of their works of supererogation, as if they found no great difficulty in fulfilling the law of God. It must be admitted that each of us, according to the measure of the virtues which God has bestowed upon him, is the more strongly bound to thank the Author of them; and that it is an exercise of holy meditation for each of us to ponder on the benefits which he has received, so as not to bury in ingratitude the kindness of God. But there are two things here that must be observed: we must not swell with confidence, as if we had satisfied God; and, next, we must not look down with disdainful contempt upon our brethren. In both respects the Pharisee erred; for, by falsely claiming righteousness for himself, he left nothing to the mercy of God; and, next, he despised all others in comparison of himself. And, indeed, that thanksgiving would not have been disapproved by Christ, if it had not laboured under these two defects; but as the proud

hypocrite, by winking at his sins, met the justice of God with a pretence of complete and perfect righteousness, his wicked and detestable hardihood could not but make him fall. For the only hope of the godly, so long as they labour under the weakness of the flesh, is, after acknowledging what is good in them, to betake themselves to the mercy of God alone, and to rest their salvation on prayer for forgiveness.

But it may be asked, how did this man, who was blinded by wicked pride, maintain such sanctity of life? for such integrity proceeds only from the Spirit of God, who, we are certain, does not reign in hypocrites. I reply: he trusted only to outward appearance, as if the hidden and inward uncleanness of the heart would not be taken into the account. Though he was full of wicked desires within, yet as he looks only at the appearance, he boldly maintains his innocence. Our Lord does not, indeed, accuse him of vanity, in falsely claiming for himself what he does not possess; but it ought to be believed that no man is pure from extortion, injustice, uncleanness, and other vices, unless he is governed by the Spirit of God.

13. The publican standing at a distance. Here Christ did not intend to lay down a general rule, as if it were necessary, whenever we pray, to cast down our eyes to the ground. He merely describes the tokens of humility, which alone he recommends to his disciples. Now humility lies in not refusing to acknowledge our sins, but condemning ourselves, and thus anticipating the judgment of God; and, with the view of being reconciled to God, in making an honest confession of guilt. Such, too, is the cause of that shame which always accompanies repentance; for Christ insists chiefly on this point, that the publican sincerely acknowledged himself to be miserable and lost, and fled to the mercy of God. Though he is a sinner, he trusts to a free pardon, and hopes that God will be gracious to him. In a word, in order to obtain favour, he owns that he does not deserve it. And, certainly, since it is the forgiveness of sins that alone reconciles God to us, we must begin with this, if we desire that he would accept our prayers. He who acknowledges that he is guilty and convicted, and then proceeds to implore pardon, disavows all confidence in works; and Christ's object was to show that God will not be gracious to any but those who betake themselves with trembling to his mercy alone.

14. This man went down justified. The comparison is not exact; for Christ does not merely assign to the publican a certain degree of superiority, as if righteousness had belonged alike to both, but means that the publican was accepted by God, while the Pharisee was totally rejected. And this passage shows plainly what is the strict meaning of the word justified: it means, to stand before God as if we were righteous. For it is not said that the publican was justified, because he suddenly acquired some new quality, but that he obtained grace, because his guilt was blotted out, and his sins were washed away. Hence it follows, that righteousness consists in the forgiveness of sins. As the virtues of the Pharisee were defiled and polluted by unfounded confidence, so that his integrity, which deserved commendation before the world, was of no value in the sight of God; so the publican, relying on no merits of works, obtained righteousness solely by imploring pardon, because he had no other ground of hope than the pure mercy of God.

But it may be thought absurd, that all should be reduced to the same level, since the purity of saints is widely different from that of the publican. I reply: whatever proficiency any man may have made in the worship of God and in true holiness, yet if he consider how far he is still deficient, there is no other form of prayer which he can properly use than to begin with the acknowledgment of guilt; for though some are more, and others less, yet all are universally guilty. We cannot doubt, therefore, that Christ now lays down a rule for all to this effect, that God will not be pacified towards us, unless we distrust works, and pray that we may be freely

reconciled. And, indeed, the Papists are compelled to acknowledge this in part, but immediately afterwards they debase this doctrine by a wicked invention. They admit that all need the remedy of forgiveness, because no man is perfect; but they first intoxicate wretched men with reliance on what they call imperfect righteousness, and next add satisfactions, in order to blot out their guilt. But our faith needs no other support than this, that God has accepted us, not because we deserved it, but because he does not impute our sins.

Source: John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, vol. 2, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), on Luke 18:9–14. Public domain; digitized by the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, Calvin University (calvin.edu).

Appendix: The Talmud on Multiple Truths (Eruvin 13b; Chagigah 3b)

Eruvin 13b. Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

The Gemara asks: Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the halakha established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the halakha they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.

Chagigah 3b. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya commenced his lecture and taught: It is written: “The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are those that are composed in collections; they are given by one shepherd” (Ecclesiastes 12:11). Why are matters of Torah compared to a goad? To tell you that just as this goad directs the cow to her furrow to bring forth sustenance for life to the world, so too the words of Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life... “Those that are composed in collections [ba’alei asupot]”: these are Torah scholars who sit in many groups [asupot] and engage in Torah study. There are often debates among these groups, as some of these Sages render an object or person ritually impure and these render it pure; these prohibit an action and these permit it; these deem an item invalid and these deem it valid.

Lest a person say: Now, how can I study Torah when it contains so many different opinions? The verse states that they are all “given from one shepherd.” One God gave them; one leader, i.e., Moses, said them from the mouth of the Master of all creation, Blessed be He, as it is written: “And God spoke all these words” (Exodus 20:1). The plural form “words” indicates that God transmitted all the interpretations of the Ten Commandments. Since the Sages invariably utilize the Torah itself or the statements of the prophets as the sources for their opinions, there is a certain unity to the study of Torah, despite the numerous explanations and applications.

So too you, the student, make your ears like a funnel and acquire for yourself an understanding heart to hear both the statements of those who render objects ritually impure and the statements of those who render them pure; the statements of those who prohibit actions and the statements

of those who permit them; the statements of those who deem items invalid and the statements of those who deem them valid.

Source: The William Davidson Talmud (Koren-Steinsaltz), Eruvin 13b and Chagigah 3b, as digitized by Sefaria (sefaria.org). Licensed CC BY-NC.

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