

Sermon 20/21 October 2007
Preacher: David Jones
LUKE 18:1-14

As a child I grew up going to church and it was an important part of my life, but I would not say I knew God. The bible says: **"They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge"** (Romans 10:2). Perhaps that described me. It describes quite a lot of people. That is why it is in the Scriptures. It was always important to me to be involved in the church.

I remember as a teenager joining others one Christmas singing carols from the back of a truck as it drove around the streets of Albury. At one point I looked out and saw someone I recognized amongst those who were listening to us, and I felt very embarrassed.

A few years later I went up to university in Sydney and came under some good teaching from the Scriptures and as a fairly shy 17 year old I came to personally trust Jesus and that he had died for my sins and I committed myself to following him. I cannot recall any dramatic religious experience. Both my home and church were conservative and undemonstrative. However, one night as I was kneeling by my bed saying prayers, I had a distinct impression of God saying these simple words to me: ***You don't have to do anything.*** (Repeat) It is possible to trust God without having to do anything except trust him and his promises.

C.S. Lewis as a young man tried to make sense of life. He began by assuming that he was on his own in this journey. He was 31 when he had an experience that convinced him he was not alone. He was not yet a Christian but he knew there was someone else in the equation. He said, *I now know that there is another party in the affair – that I am playing poker, not patience, as I once supposed.*

We look at things from our side, from our point of view. And God from his side is already at work seeking us out. He is somewhat like a lover wooing his beloved. I remember wooing my beloved as a young man. She attended Women's College at Sydney University and her room was above the main front entrance. One evening I climbed up the vine outside and knocked on her window. She let me in but was a little anxious lest we disturb her room mates or be discovered!

Life can be hard, and it can be exciting and fun, too. I have enjoyed life with Gretta ever since. The Scriptures tell us that it is like that with God, too. He wants a joyous, loving, lively relation with us. So why doesn't this happen all the time? Much has been said and written about this and the major world religions all attempt to deal with the problems of suffering and sadness and loneliness. What do you think is the worst enemy we face?

As a boy I would come with my family from the Riverina for summer holidays in Sydney and go to the beach. One day as a 10 year old I was swimming happily off Manly beach when this friendly man swam up and began a conversation. He suggested we go back in to shore. I did not realize I was in a rip getting further out to sea all the time. He was a Lifesaver and he rescued me even though I had not realized I needed saving!

In our hearts and lives at some deep point most people realize that something is not right. We crave to be loved and accepted, to enjoy relationships with others. That is natural. And we want to project a happy exterior. *I'm alright aren't I?* What do we have to do to be accepted, to find fulfillment, to get on with other people?

Today's Scripture reading shows us the answer to life's basic riddle. Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem and the shadow of the cross falls across his path as he tells this story of the two men who go up to pray in the temple. God does accept you just as you are and he is keen to put things right. This is called Justification or Justifying Grace. Look at our passage. Will you read Luke 18 verse 14 with me, the first part of it: **"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God"** (Luke 18:14 NIV).

Justify or justification is sometimes spelt like this: **"Just** – as – **if"** I had not sinned. In the story Jesus tells, both men do a good thing. Each goes to church. Each prays. They are good things, aren't they? So what is the difference. Only the despised tax collector is "justified" according to Jesus. The Pharisee, who does all the good things and looks down on the tax collector, does not receive God's forgiveness because he is "self" righteous.

When God visits you and me, it is to put right what we have done wrong. Part of the difficulty is that we are not honest enough with ourselves, and gloss over the sins. There was a man who heard the preacher quote the Scriptures, **"For all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory."** He said to the minister. But I am not a sinner! The minister asked him a few questions, and discovered he was a traveling salesman. Was he always truthful with his expense account? *"Well of course I might claim a bit more than I have spent, but everyone does, don't they?"* Was he always honest about the performance of the product that he sold? *"I only follow standard practice. I don't draw attention to its limitations and perhaps exaggerate a little. But it's a competitive market these days."* Was he always faithful to his wife? *"Well you know, on long trips away, I sometimes need a bit of comfort."*

So the minister said to him, *"You have just told me that you are a cheat, a liar and an adulterer, and you say you are not a sinner!"*

When we compare ourselves with the world, then most of us probably stack up OK. However if we are to be put right with God there comes a point where we have to admit we have lost our way. We are like I was as a boy swimming off Manly beach. We just 'go with the flow' and do not realize that we need saving! I needed the Lifesaver to take me back to safety.

God is like that. He is at work. Our job is to seek his mercy. His job is to save. Do not reject Jesus and what he did for you. It cost him everything. He gave his all to you. Give yourself to him. Trust and follow him and he will bring you through to safety.