

## “Church Member Or Christ-Follower?”

Luke 18:9-14

I am so excited to be here today. When Pastor Phil asked me to do this, he left me a voicemail. I didn't know what it was about, so here I am listening to it: “Hey Andrew, this is Pastor Phil Thraikill. I just got your sermon. Very thoughtful, but if you'll give me a ring, I have a question to ask. It'll take just a minute, if you could call me back as soon as you can. Thank you.” Click.

Now, I had no idea why he had called. My first thought was, “just got your sermon . . .” What is he talking about? Then it dawned on me. Pastor Phil is on the District Committee for Ordained Ministry. As a licensed local pastor, I have to meet with this committee on a yearly basis, and they vote to decide whether or not I can continue as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. In preparation for this meeting, I had to submit several things. One of which was a sermon of my choosing.

That's when the wave of panic swept over me . . . “Oh no! Have I made an unbiblical statement already?” What is he going to ask me?! Thankfully, it wasn't a difficult theological question! He just wanted to give me this opportunity: to come and share the Good News with you today.

Before we dive into the scripture this morning, do y'all like jokes? I was going to tell my favorite Pastor Phil joke, but I think I might get in trouble for that one. In Mark chapter 1, Jesus heals a BUNCH of people. In verses 30-31, he heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. She's sick, laying in the bed, probably feeling like death, and Jesus heals her. She feels so much better, she gets up and cooks dinner! Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law . . . and many scholars believe that's why he denied Jesus 3 times . . . I am kidding. That is completely untrue. Just a joke.

Our scripture focus today is Luke 18:9-14. I want to go through it and explain a few things.

9 Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: 10 “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector.

*(Now, if you've been around church awhile, you've heard of a Pharisee before. You know something about the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Usually, we see the word “Pharisee” and we think “okay, that's the bad guy.” That's not the case at all! In fact, the Pharisees believed that their faith extended beyond the Temple – I can agree with that – they have been described as “applying Jewish law to mundane activities in order to sanctify the every-day world.” That doesn't sound like a terrible idea. They did take it a bit further, though. “The Pharisees believed that all Jews in their ordinary life, and not just the Temple priesthood or Jews visiting the Temple, should observe the rules and rituals concerning purification.” If you've ever read through the Torah, which is just a fancy name for those first 5 books in the bible, you'll read all those rules and rituals for purification. Honestly, it's kind of boring. There are hundreds of rules that were originally meant for priests and those serving or entering the temple. The Pharisees*

*held the belief that these rules should apply to everyone for everyday life. Not necessarily a bad thing to be pure, right? I can't fault them for that. The Pharisees had also MEMORIZED the Torah. Yes, I said MEMORIZED. They could recite, word for word, the first 5 books of the bible. Here, let me try . . . Y'all got time, right? \*\*\* Well . . . I didn't do very good. How far can you get? I'll bet none of you can recite the entire Torah. The Pharisees could. They were church people! Good church people. They followed the Law that God gave to Moses to the letter. They did EVERYTHING it said. They were not the bad guys.*

*The tax collector on the other hand . . . Now we may think, "he's not bad just because he's collecting taxes. He's just doing his job." While that may be true, the tax collectors of the day went house to house to collect taxes. Many of them were deceitful. They would overcharge people. It's almost like you going to H&R Block and getting your taxes done and the guy tells you that you're getting a \$500 refund. In actuality you got a \$1000 refund, but he told you \$500 and he took the other \$500 for himself. Other tax collectors were even violent. They coerced or forced extra taxes out of people in order to keep the extra for themselves – to make themselves rich. That's why people hated tax collectors. These were bad guys.*

*In this passage of scripture, we have a Pharisee compared to a tax collector. To put it in today's terms, we have a Sunday School teacher compared to a drug dealer. So back to verse 10 . . .)*

10 "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! 12 I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' 14 I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

*(Jesus says, "this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God." He said this, because, like we talked about, the Pharisees were church people. They were very devout. They followed all the "church rules." They memorized bible verses. They gave a tenth of everything they made to the church. As a matter of fact, they adhered to the fullest extent that you could interpret the tithe in the Law, and in doing so, they submitted themselves to more than one tithe. There were multiple instance where the law "required" a tithe. That meant that the Pharisees were giving what ultimately amounted to 20% of their income, not 10%. They were good church members. You would expect a Pharisee to go home justified before God. The Pharisees that Jesus addresses were good church members, but they weren't good Christ-followers.)*

Jesus even addresses the Pharisees as the "official interpreters of the law of Moses" in Matthew 23. In fact, He says "practice and obey whatever they tell you." But then He says,

“Don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach.” Honestly, the Pharisee wasn’t even praying. He didn’t ask God for anything. The Pharisee is expressing thankfulness for who he is, rather than for who God is. One of the bible commentaries I use says, “He glances at God, but contemplates himself.” He selfish and self-centered!

I’m going to read bits and pieces of Matthew 23, but I’m going to change a few words. The biggest change is: I’m going to change the word “Pharisees” to “church members.”

They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. “Everything they do is for show. In their arms they carry extra big bibles, and they wear shiny crosses around their necks. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in through Walmart, and to say things like ‘Have a blessed day.’

What sorrow awaits you church members. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces. You won’t go in yourselves, and you don’t let others enter either.

What sorrow awaits you church members. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are!

What sorrow awaits you church members. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest of your income, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, **but do not neglect the more important things.**

What sorrow awaits you church members. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs – outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell?

Look y’all, Jesus wasn’t playing around. He told them, “Don’t you dare come up in this temple, acting all high and mighty, when you know you’ve neglected people. You know you’ve not treated people with compassion when they needed it most. You follow all the rules! You do all this good church member stuff, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith.” He called them snakes! The good church-going, bible verse memorizing, Sunday school teaching tithers . . . “How will you escape the judgement of hell?”

So that begs the question: are you a church member or are you a Christ follower? Do you fill your pew every Sunday? Do you tithe? Do you read scripture daily? Those are all good things . . . But you **can** do all those and **not** be a Christ follower. The church is not a country club. We already have one of those here in town. Do you help people in need? Do you offer forgiveness – even to those that don’t deserve it? Do you pray for your community, your leaders, your family? Do you put on a good face for Sunday morning so you can check off your “church box” for the week? Or do you live your life for Christ?

Here's the situation: it's Sunday morning. You're ready, your husband or wife is ready, you FINALLY get the kids ready for church. You get out the door maybe a minute late, but you can make that up by driving a little fast. Halfway to church, you see someone pulled over on the side of the road. You have a choice: stop and help and be late to church, all sweaty, maybe even greasy OR drive on by and get to church on time, clean, and not pouring sweat. What choice does the good church member make? What choice should we make if we want to be more Christ-like?

I titled this sermon "Church Member or Christ-Follower?" but those aren't supposed to be 2 separate things. The church isn't meant to be a place you come to thank God for how holy you are. When the local church is working right, there is nothing more powerful and breathtaking in the world. It's the place where lost people are found, where found people grow to love Jesus more, where addicts are set free, where the excluded are included, where the hopeless find hope, where marriages are restored, where forgiveness is extended and where God gets the glory for it all!

I want to challenge you to pray for and look for those opportunities to be more like Jesus Christ. They aren't going to come easy. They are going to be at the most inconvenient time. You're going to be dressed for church. You're going to be on your way to a very important meeting. Whatever it is, it's going to make you late for something. It's going to make you have to put something off until tomorrow. Stop for just a second and think about what's really important. If you walk into church late, is it REALLY going to matter? (To God – not all the people that are going to turn around and stare at you, but is it going to matter to God?) If you're a few minutes late for that business luncheon, is it REALLY going to matter? If that load of laundry waiting at home doesn't get folded today, is it REALLY going to matter?

I want to end today with a little bit of encouragement: A backpacker, a pastor, and a college professor were all riding on a small little airplane. They were all headed to the same little island. The backpacker was going to hike all over the island and just enjoy nature. The pastor was going to the little village on the island to volunteer at the orphanage. The professor was going to study a rare bird species that only lived on the south side of the island.

Suddenly the pilot turned around and said, "Um . . . hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we have engine trouble; we're going down. But we've only got 3 parachutes. My plane – I get one. Good luck." Then he grabbed a parachute, strapped it on, and jumped out. Then the professor said, "I am important. Just think of all the students who need me. I am a PHD. The university won't be able to function without me. I am high ranking member of society. I should get a parachute." So the professor grabbed a parachute and jumped. Then the pastor said to the backpacker, "Look, son. I've lived a long, wonderful life. I know that when this plane hits the ground, I am going to be with my Father in Heaven. You take the last parachute."

"That won't be necessary, sir," said the backpacker.

“What do you mean, son? You’re so young. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. I’ve lived my life. Take the last parachute.”

“No, but . . .”

“I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer! Now take the parachute and go!”

“Look, I don’t want to die . . . but that professor that just jumped . . . he grabbed my backpack.”

The moral of the story is: don’t be so absorbed in self-importance and self-thought that you grab a backpack instead of a parachute. Think about others first. Don’t be so self-absorbed that you grab hold of a **good** life instead of a Jesus-filled life. Our biggest issue here in the “bible belt” isn’t the non-believers. It’s the ones who think they believe. It’s the people who would say “Of course I’m a Christian. I go to church.” Is that enough? Are we standing on the promises? Or are we just sitting on the premises? So many of you would call yourselves Christian, but you aren’t living the true Christian life. You aren’t following Jesus. You are holding on to something that looks like the Christian life, but on the inside it’s full of things that leave you wanting more, needing more. You’ve grabbed hold of a backpack and jumped. But when you open it up, it is going to leave you wanting more. It won’t save you. What WILL save you is the blood of Jesus Christ that poured from His body as he suffered and died on the cross. Only a relationship with Him will save you.

If you don’t have a relationship with Him, I want to offer you an opportunity to begin that relationship. If you’ve had a relationship with Him, but you’ve forgotten to set aside time for that relationship, I want to offer you the opportunity to ask for forgiveness, and to start fresh. We are going to pray together. If you wish, you can simply pray to yourself right where you are. I’m not going to make you raise your hand or look up at me or meet me in the back or anything. This is a personal decision. I just want to give you the chance to decide without any pressure. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, I have not spent the time with you that you desire. I want a relationship with you that grows . . . and fills me with joy. I ask you to come into my life or come back into my life today and make me whole. I ask that you would guide me from this day forward to understand your will, and to follow it. In the name of your precious son, Jesus Christ . . .

At this time, we are going to continue with a moment of silent prayer. This is a time you can listen . . . hear what God is telling you . . . and respond.

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Amen.