

Our Starting Point:
October 26, 2025

Have you ever been really good at something?
Have you ever been told...
You're the best?
Did you believe it? **[1 Starter]**

Ok. A long long time ago...
In a land far away... Iowa...
I was a pretty good runner...

There was one track meet...
Where I was the favorite...
For a two mile run.

The coach had pumped me up.
We compared all the times...
Of all the other runners.
We trained hard.

Eventually... it was the day of the race.
But this idea... of winning...
And the pressure...
I put on myself.
Was building up...

We took our places...
On the starting line.
This was not a sprint...
Not the kind of run...
Where you get down...
Into the blocks...
It was long distance...
So you have a standing start.

The official stood...
At the edge of the track...
And said the words...
I had been anticipating...

Runners.... To your mark...
Set... and then... the starter pistol...
Would fire.

But it fired twice...
Which meant something had gone wrong.
The race needed to stop.
It was me.

I was supposed to win.
Supposedly... I was the best runner on the line.
And I was the one who... jumped the gun.

It was a two mile race.
Which is a really long distance...
And I jumped the gun.

I could have stood perfectly still.
Counted to three... twiddled my thumbs...
And then started running...
And still finished the race...
At least I would have run.

But those who jump the gun...
Are disqualified.

Everyone was disappointed.
But no one more than... me.

I was so worried about winning...
About crossing that finish line...
Before all the other runners.

I was so filled with anxiety...
About being the best...
About winning.
To please my coach... my family.
To be the best I could be.

That I forgot my starting point.
I forgot that I knew how to run.
I was good at running.
I just needed to do it.
It was part of who...
God created me to be.

If I had just relaxed...
If I had just breathed...
If I had just been...
Present in the moment...
Instead of trying to create the future...
By my own power.

I might have done well.
But as it turned out.
I didn't even get to start.

It's kind of how we view things sometimes. **[2 Thoughts]**
We think that it's our responsibility...
To get everything just right.

We feel an unreasonable pressure...
To be practically perfect in every way.

We beat ourselves up...
When things go wrong.

Like we should... be able to do better.
Like we should be more than what we really are.
Like somehow... we need to be great.
Make a huge impact... on the world around us.
And thereby... win at life.

We like to should on ourselves.
But that kind of attitude...
Eats away at our joy...

It causes us... to be dissatisfied...
About who are.
About our life... on the whole...
About everything... around us.

And then... that self-critical attitude...
Turns outward... toward other people.
Because it is human nature...
To push other people down...
In order to raise ourselves up.

We trash talk...
Gossip... sneer... criticize...
And point out...
That others are less...
Than they ought to be.

To make ourselves... feel better.

This has become an epidemic...
In our modern world.

We are always looking for...
The flaws... in other people.

It reminds me of... **[3 Pharisee]**
The poor old confused Pharisee...
In the gospel lesson.

He thought that the way to righteousness...
Had to do with some...
Intrinsic value he had.

He was righteous... because...
He was good... a good person.
He kept the rules.
He did everything the way...
He was supposed to do.

He gave 10% of his income...
He practiced fasting... twice a week.

He was awesome.

Especially when he compared himself... **[4 Thank You God]**
To other people.
Like thieves. Rogues.
Adulterers. Tax collectors.

Obviously... all these people...
Had failed... in some way...
To fulfill the expectations of God.
According to this incredibly righteous man.

So... can I ask you...
A serious personal question.
One that might hurt your heart...
Just a little bit.

Do you see... yourself in that Pharisee at all?

I remember... one time... a teacher told me...
If you really want to understand a parable...
You have to put yourself in the position...
Of each one of the characters.

And that makes sense right...
Because Jesus is trying to teach us...
About the dynamic nature of life. **[5 Character]**

The way he wants us to be...
And the way he doesn't want us to be...
Both characters play an important part.

Therefore... logically...
We must act like the Pharisees...
Sometimes.
Or else Jesus wouldn't have mentioned it.

Sometimes... we must think we are great.
Doing exactly what God has asked us to do.
Self-righteous...
Fulfilling the rules.
Being really good people.

And sometimes... we must look at other people...
Like we are better than them.
People we think are doing the wrong things.
People we have declared evil.
People who have made seriously wrong choices. IMHO.

We look at them... and say...
Thank you God...
That I'm one of the good ones.
Thank you God...
That I'm not like them.

Luke said...
Jesus told this parable...
To those who trusted in themselves...
That they were righteous...
And regarded others...
With contempt.

Well... that's us. Right?
That's us... sometimes.

But...

It doesn't have to be this way.
There is another way...
A second choice...
That Jesus is teaching us...

And it all depends on...
YOUR STARTING POINT.

Please compare... the Pharisee... **[6 Sinner]**
To the tax collector...
Who looked into his own heart...
And didn't feel great...
About what he found there.

He found... nothing.
Nothing to brag about.
Nothing to bring to God.
Nothing that made him feel wonderful.

He was empty.
Of pride and accomplishments.
Of purpose and meaning.

He couldn't do anything... to help himself...in that moment.
He didn't have anything left... inside of himself.
And he didn't have anywhere else to go.

Except to fall...
On the mercy of God.

He wouldn't come near the Temple.
He wouldn't lift his eyes to heaven...

He couldn't stand... to be...
In God's presence at all.

So instead... from a distance...
He beat his chest.
He cried out...
God... be merciful to me... a sinner.

His starting point...
Of interacting with God...
Was way different...
Than the Pharisee.

And Jesus said...
This man. This tax collector. This sinner...
Is the one who went home justified.
Because of where he began...
And how he approached God.

That's not to say...
In order to be a good faithful...
Follower of Christ...

We need to have low self-esteem.
Or we need to be self-destructive...
In any way, shape, or form.

No. We just need to have a healthy...
And realistic assessment...
Of where we are...
And how we begin.

We need to understand...
What kind of attitude...
Makes it possible...
For faith to be born... and reborn...
In our hearts. **[7 Humility]**

Jesus said... this humility is the point...
Where transformation...
Becomes possible.

It is right there...
Where God meets us...
And heals what is broken.
And forgives our sin.
And gives us hope.

And it's **ALL** of us.
That's the mistake the Pharisee made...
He needed to include himself...
In his list... of people who needed God's mercy.

All have sinned and fallen short... of the Glory of God...
Every single person.

If we claim to be without sin...
We deceive ourselves..
And the truth is not in us.

But if we confess our sin...
God who is faithful and just...
Will forgive our sin...
And cleanse us...
From all unrighteousness.

If we have a right spirit...
We can say... I know, God... **[8 I Know]**

I know... who I am....
I know... I am not righteous...

I know... I have made big mistakes...
And bad choices...
In the past...

I know... I have failed.
In my relationship with God...
And my relationship with others.

And the reason I can say... I know...
Without fear or doubt...
Is because my failures...
And even my accomplishments...
Do not have the power... to define who I am.

God does.

The good news for today...
IS that it's not up to us...
To make ourselves right.

We do not possess the power...
To become righteous...
In the sight of God.

There isn't some magic combination...
Of behavior that is going to open up...
The Kingdom of Heaven...
To you or to me.

We can't earn it.
It has to be given to us. **[9 Alien Righteousness]**

It's what Luther called...
ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS...
Which is righteousness...
That comes from the outside.

It's not our work...
That makes us right.

It's Christ's work.

It has always been...
Christ's work.

He does everything.
He has claimed us.
He has covered us.
He has redeemed us.
He has taken our sin...
And our punishment.

And then... he presented us... to God...
As people who are worthy of his love...

I want to end today...
With a quote from Martin Luther...
That summarizes...
This whole thing. **[10 Nothing]**

God created the world out of nothing,
And so long as we are nothing,
God can make something out of us.

See... this is a great day.
Every year... we celebrate Reformation...

Which is the annual reclamation...
Of this eternal truth...
We are justified by grace...
Through faith.

It is God's gift.
And no work of my own.

Which should cause...
EXTREME JOY in our hearts...
Because it means... it's not up to us...
And we are not bound... or defined...
By our past.
By our sin.
By our death.

We are free...
By the love of God...
Through the work of Christ...
We are actually... honestly... completely free...

And nothing...
Has the power...
To take that away...
From us.

Happy Reformation.
Thanks be to God. Amen.