

*Text of a message delivered by Mikayla Claasen at Windsor Park Baptist Church on Sunday 23rd of August 2026.
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Have Mercy on Me

Luke 18:9 – 18:43

Kia Ora Windsor whānau, it is a pleasure to be here with you opening God's word together. If we haven't met before my name is Mikayla, and I'm the Youth Ministry coordinator here at Windsor.

One thing most people quickly learn about me is that I'm an avid reader. I'm the type of person who celebrates the end of semester—and all those compulsory readings—by finding a really chunky novel to dive into, rather than taking a break from reading altogether. I've read many books over the years—both novels and non-fiction—that have shaped me. But one of the books that has haunted me most is *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. Who's read that one?

If you have not read it the premise sounds a little strange - it is written from the perspective of a head demon, writing letters to a demon-in-training on how to tempt and corrupt the human he has been assigned to. It is a rather confronting read, and there are various passages that often still come through my mind. And today, before we get to Luke - I want to share with you one of those passages in which the head demon says:

The most alarming thing in your last account of the patient is that he is making none of those confident resolutions which marked his original conversion. No more lavish promises of perpetual virtue, I gather; not even the expectation of an endowment of

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"grace" for life, but only a hope for the daily and hourly pittance to meet the daily and hourly temptation!

In this section the head demon expresses his displeasure that this human they are trying to tempt, no longer sees God or God's provision as complex philosophic concepts, but as a daily reality to revel in. There are no big proclamations or bold statements of intent - but a quiet willingness to rely - hour by hour, minute by minute - on the grace provided by Jesus.

I first read this as a twenty-year-old who spent a lot of time making big promises to God, so it struck me deeply. To think that one of the greatest markers of spiritual maturity, isn't becoming more confident in ourselves - it's becoming more aware of how deeply we need Jesus, really challenged me the first time I read this, and as I read through what Luke has to say to us this week, these words challenged me all over again.

So let's leave Lewis behind for a moment and turn to Luke 18, starting with verse 9.

He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I 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. (Luke 18:9-14)

By this point in Luke's Gospel, stories like this have become familiar: a wealthy, self-important person who thinks they've got it all together is upstaged by the humble, unexpected person who truly understands the kingdom of God. By now, we're well aware of Luke's tendency to tell stories that overturn social expectations and highlight those on the margins.

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So, what makes this story different?

One of the unique features of this parable is that it's a story about **approach**. This isn't Jesus reaching out to someone. It isn't an invitation to a dinner. These are people coming to God. Luke is no longer looking at who is invited, but how we approach the open invitation to Jesus.

The Pharisee comes and, Luke tells us, he is "**standing by himself, praying**"—or, as some translations suggest, literally "*praying to himself*." He lists everything he's done, every reason he believes he's better than everyone else. He's so confident in his own righteousness that he walks past the tax collector and into the inner courts - the holiest part - of the temple. The Pharisee comes to the temple, supposedly to worship God. But everything about his words and actions reveals that he never really turns toward God at all. Instead, he turns inward - he looks to himself. God does not need to be part of this equation at all.

Then we met **the tax collector**. He remains at a distance, outside the temple courts, beating his chest—a sign of anguish—and simply cries, "**God, be merciful to me, a sinner.**" And Jesus says that this man goes home justified.

The cries of this tax-collector seem to echo the cries of Isaiah: '**Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!**' (Isaiah 6:5) Both Isaiah and the tax collector come into the presence of holiness and respond in the same way: 'Woe is me.' They both shout – '*Here I am, standing before the dwelling place of the Lord. I am unclean. I cannot stand in this holy place.*' Both Isaiah and the tax collector see God in His full majesty, and in seeing God rightly, they see themselves rightly - not as despicable or with self-hatred, but aware of how much they lack, how little they have to offer - in front of their Holy, Perfect, Creator God. The tax collector isn't commended because he hates himself. He's commended because he sees God clearly enough to recognise his own need for God's mercy.

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I wonder if this feels uncomfortable to some of us. There's been a push in recent years to see God primarily as friendly and approachable - and I'm not saying this isn't true, but I do think it might not be the whole picture. It is very hard to come to God beating our chest and crying out for mercy - aware of how little we have and can offer - when the only concept we have of our God is that He is our friend; if we forget that He is also Holy and wonderful, the Alpha and Omega.

And, it's very easy to become self-important before God when we forget He is not only the one who touches the lepers, but also the one who sets our every star in the sky. When we forget, He is not only the God who eats and drinks and laughs, but also the God from whom all life comes, who gives every creature its breath.

But before people start to complain about this picture of God maybe being too separate, too distant - Luke doesn't leave us here, and neither will I. This isn't the only picture of approaching God. It's one tile in a much larger mosaic, because the very next story gives us one of the best-known images of Jesus in the Gospels.

People were bringing even infants to him so that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' (Luke 18:15-17)

This is probably a scene we've heard so many times that we each have our own picture of it. Maybe it's a smiling Jesus holding smiling children on his lap; or if you've actually had children, you might have the more realistic image of Jesus taking them and promptly being used as a climbing gym; maybe you picture a sleeping infant, calm and close to Jesus. And just as we imagine the scene differently, we also draw different meanings from it. Some of us see Jesus' gentleness. Others see his welcome. Others hear a lesson about children themselves. That's the beauty of a scene like this—it speaks to us in many ways.

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But for a moment, I want us to set our favourite picture aside and ask what this scene would have meant to the disciples standing there watching it unfold. When we think of children, words like cute, innocent, precious, and maybe even chaotic come to mind. But for first-century Jewish men living under Roman culture, children represented something quite different. They were dependent, unable to contribute, with little social status or protection.

Jesus isn't simply inviting the disciples to admire the picture. *He's inviting them to learn from it.* To look at this picture and learn what it means to receive the Kingdom of God like a child.

And I do think it is important that Jesus uses the word **receive**. Not build. Not earn. Not even enter. Receive. It's a remarkably passive word. Watching Jesus hold these children almost evokes the image of an inheritance. A child doesn't earn an inheritance or prove they're worthy of it. They simply receive what is freely given. A child can represent many things. But here, I think Jesus is drawing our attention to one thing in particular: **dependence**. Coming to Jesus in need. Coming with empty hands. Coming with nothing to offer except ourselves. Because that is how kingdom is received—as grace. As mercy. As something we only need to open our empty hands to and receive.

The story of the tax collector and the Pharisee and the small children are both poignant in their own right, but when Luke brings them together and sits them alongside each other, he shows us something important about the kingdom of Jesus - the kingdom isn't received by those who have the most to offer. It's received by those who know they have nothing to offer. When we have nothing, that is when we are most willing to come before God open to receiving.

A child might grow up and no longer need their mother's milk, or their father's hand in theirs as they cross the road, we might grow in our gifts and talents, and be able to bring them into the kingdom but we will never grow out of needing Jesus, of our approach to Him primarily being one of dependence. No matter how hard we work, we can never work ourselves out of that need. We can never grow greater than that.

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Now we come to the third story in this chapter. This time, instead of a child, Luke introduces us to a young ruler.

A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother.’”

“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’

But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ He replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’ (Luke 18:18-27)

When we hear this story, it's often preached as a call to try harder—to slim down our desires, our wants and our possessions so that we might somehow make ourselves small enough to squeeze through the eye of the needle. We are told to work off all our baggage so we can fit in where others cannot.

But if that's all we hear, I think we make the same mistake as the rich ruler himself, and we overlook Jesus' final words. ‘Those who heard it said, ***‘Then who can be saved?’*** He replied, ***‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’***

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The rich ruler hears Jesus' invitation and immediately evaluates it in terms of his own ability. Can I do this? Can I give enough? Can I become the sort of person Jesus wants? Everything is measured by his own strength.

Or perhaps you're wondering about your journey of following Jesus and asking if you have enough willpower to stay at it because suddenly it feels so hard with everything else life is throwing at you? Maybe you're wondering if you can sacrifice what Jesus is asking you to, or if you can become the forgiving, kind, generous, and loving person Jesus is calling you to be?

But what Jesus is saying here is that this young man's own strength is irrelevant. No one's strength is enough. It is not striving that Jesus is suggesting to this young man. He's inviting him to receive the grace that makes obedience possible in the first place.

Jesus is not asking us to work harder so we become strong enough to do these things, but to recognise that even our obedience, our ability to follow God isn't something we achieve through our own strength. From beginning to end, it is sustained by grace. We are not tasked with learning how to thread ourselves through a needle; we are tasked with releasing this journey with Jesus, being able to come with Him, walk with Him, live with Him, follow Him - which can only be done through what we receive from our Creator.

The rich young ruler walks away disappointed because he comes to Jesus wanting a trick, a hack, a technique to master - just as he has mastered all the commandments. He wants Jesus to give him the missing piece so that he can complete the puzzle himself.

But Jesus isn't another good teacher offering better advice. *He is the Good God offering himself.*

Even this posture—of dependence, of need—isn't something we're left to discover on our own. At this point, Luke seems to make a surprising turn. He interrupts these encounters with Jesus' clearest prediction yet of his coming death.

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Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.' But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:31-34)

If this feels like an odd place for Luke to mention Jesus' death, you're not alone. Even the disciples don't understand what's happening. On the surface, this section feels disconnected. But their confusion is exactly the point.

At this point in Luke, Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, and He is almost at the city gates. The crowd are about to welcome him like a king. It seems like He is walking towards triumph, victory, a crown. But Jesus knows he's walking toward a cross. Jesus speaks to the disciples about suffering, about loss, about being brought low. The dissonance in this moment is tangible, and it is intentional.

Because *grace always looks weaker than we expect*. The disciples are still expecting strength and looking for power. But Jesus is trying to show them again that **the kingdom comes through humility, through the giving of oneself, and embracing dependence.**

Jesus does not want us to come to him on our knees for the sake of it. Before Jesus ever asks us to humble ourselves, he humbles himself. He calls us to come in dependence and knows that path, because it is one He, in all his Godly power, chose to walk himself when he became human, when he submitted himself to death on a cross.

And with that, Luke introduces the final encounter in this chapter—a man who finally understands what these stories have been teaching all along.

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As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.' Then he shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me see again. Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God. (Luke 18:35-43)

The blind man experiences a miracle, but he is also a role model of discipleship. And it's not because he has mastered some sort of technique - it is because this blind man is acutely aware of his position as he approaches Jesus. He is aware of his dependence, and his need for God's great mercy. He is fully aware that he desperately needs that grace - and he cries out for it. This final section in Luke is not here to remind us we are small and must act like it in front of God - it is here to remind us that we are small, yet we are given so much so freely. It is telling us that every time we think we've got somewhere in our own strength, by our own hands, we need to look again.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell was once giving a lecture about the creation of the world when an elderly woman interrupted him. She insisted the world wasn't suspended in space at all—it rested on the back of a giant turtle. Russell asked, "And what's that turtle standing on?" "Another turtle," she replied. "And beneath that?" "Another turtle." Eventually he asked, "So what's at the very bottom?" She smiled and said, "My dear, it's turtles all the way down."

We often approach God looking for the point where God's welcome to us, His invitation to us, starts relying on us. Many of us spend our Christian lives looking for the point where grace runs out, and our performance takes over. We keep wondering when God will finally say, "Now it's your turn."

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Most of us probably don't identify with the Pharisee - bragging in front of God. But I suspect many of us identify with the rich ruler. We quietly assume that, yes, Jesus saved us by grace—but now the rest is up to us. Now I've got to become the sort of Christian who deserves to stay here.

But it isn't just grace at the beginning.
It isn't grace sitting on top of our achievements.
It's grace all the way down.

Mercy upon mercy. Grace upon grace. Dig as deeply as you like beneath your Christian life—you'll never find anything holding it up except the grace of God.

The only question left is whether we're willing to come with empty hands, knowing we need that mercy—and willing simply to receive it.

And the blind man does not just demonstrate our way to approach Jesus - his story is the most visible reminder to us that mercy doesn't leave people where they are. The tax collector goes home justified. The children receive the kingdom. The blind man follows Jesus, glorifying God. Dependence isn't the goal. Union with Christ is. Dependence is simply the doorway that leads us to receive Grace.

As we grow in Christ, we don't outgrow dependence. We become more aware of it. Maturity isn't making "lavish promises of perpetual virtue," but learning to receive "the daily and hourly pittance" of grace. In that sense, spiritual maturity is not increasing self-confidence before God but increasing confidence in God's grace and mercy, one moment at a time.

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Reflecting on Lifecare Sunday 9th August 2026:

Last week Caleb asked us to consider what we are focused on – where have you been able to focus on God this week? What have you heard Him say to you?

These questions help you think more about this message. We hope they might be a conduit for conversation and reflection, encouraging us to wrestle with how this message might practically work itself out in our lives.

- The Pharisee, tax collector, children, rich ruler and blind man all approach Jesus differently. Which of these people do you most naturally identify with, and why?
- The tax collector and blind man both cry out, “Have mercy on me.” What might it look like for you to bring your actual need or weakness to Jesus rather than trying to fix it yourself?
- What is one thing you could practise this week to remind yourself to depend on Jesus moment by moment—perhaps through the breath prayer, prayer before a difficult task, or deliberately asking for help?

If you’d like to chat with someone about your spiritual journey or anything else going on in your life, please contact us at care@windsorpark.org.nz; **we’re better together** and **no perfect people are allowed**.

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Below are some further resources that may take the message further and deeper and enable you to explore other viewpoints on the same theme. We also encourage you to engage with the preacher if there are further questions you have or if you'd like clarification on anything. Email info@windsorpark.org.nz and we'll direct your query to the appropriate person.

1. You're Only Human by Kelly M. Kopic

This is a book exploring what it means to be dependent on God and how dependence is a good part of our design.

<https://books.cornerstone.org.nz/products/Youre-Only-Human-How-Your-Limits-Reflect-Gods-Design-and-Why-Thats-Good-News-p604114504>

2. If you want to learn more about breath prayer.

Breath prayer is a really simple exercise to add into your life. This has a deeper explanation of how it works and other suggestions of phrases to use.

<https://www.soulshpherd.org/breath-prayers>