

Luke 18:9–14: <sup>9</sup>[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

## There Are No “Good Guys”

### INTRODUCTION

In dramatic literature, there is always a protagonist and an antagonist. The protagonist is the good guy and the antagonist is the bad guy. There is drama tension when the bad guy goes against the good guy. Resolution of that tension takes place when the bad guy is defeated by the good guy. In today’s dramatic literature, it isn’t always easy to tell who the good guy or the bad guy is. But in the old TV and movie westerns, it was easy to know who the good guy was and who the bad guy was. The good guy always wore the white hat and the bad guy always wore the black hat. And of course, when you think of the quintessential bad guy, you have to think of Darth Vader, who not only wore a black helmet, but his whole costume was an imposing black.

In today’s computer world, the idea of the bad guy wearing a black hat is in use. A black-hat hacker is a computer hacker who “violates computer security for little reason beyond maliciousness or for personal gain.”

As we look at today’s readings from God’s Word, it seems at first glance to be easy to pick out the good guys and the bad guys.

In the account of Cain and Abel, who would you say is the good guy and who is the bad guy? That seems pretty obvious, doesn't it? Abel is the good guy because God liked his sacrifice. And Cain is the bad guy—he had a bad attitude, God didn't like his sacrifice, and he gave into sin and committed the first murder. Now that was a bad guy!

In the Epistle reading—what is likely the last letter that Paul wrote before his martyrdom at the hand of Nero—Paul lets Timothy know who the bad guys are: The so-called friends who abandoned him in his time of need. The one friend in particular was Demas, whom Paul said, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.” Paul mentions another bad guy, too, “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.”

And then there's the parable in the Gospel reading of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. When you first heard this parable, who did you think was the good guy and who was the bad guy?

The first time Jesus' disciples heard the parable, they would have thought that the Pharisee was the good guy. He was a keeper of the Law—not an extortioner or unjust or an adulterer—he worshipped regularly, he fasted twice a week, and he gave a tenth of his earnings to the work of the temple. In their eyes, he's the good guy.

It's the one who colluded with the Roman government to tax his own people—who often skimmed off the top to enrich himself at the expense of his own people—he was the bad guy.

Now, if you asked the Pharisee if he was a good guy or a bad guy what would he say? And if you asked the Tax Collector if he was a good guy or a bad guy what would he say? Yet who went home justified before God? It wasn't the good guy, was it?!

There are protagonists—good guys—and antagonists—bad guys—in dramatic literature.

But what if I told you there are no good guys before God? When the apostle Paul writes in Romans, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” and in Ephesians, “You were dead in trespasses and sins ... by nature children of wrath” that’s an announcement that we’re all antagonistic to God—we’re all rebels and self-worshippers—we’re all conceived and born in sin! We’re all bad guys!

We live in an age of affirmation. We’re told that in order to build up self-esteem, we need to tell people that they are special—especially children. We shouldn’t say anything that might hurt someone’s feelings; and that there shouldn’t be winners or losers—everyone should get an award simply for participation.

In this age of affirmation, there are no “bad guys,” and it shows in modern literature. Take *Sleeping Beauty*, for example. In Disney’s 1959 installment of the Grimm’s fairy tale, Maleficent is clearly a “bad guy”—her title is Mistress of All Evil—there’s nothing redeeming about her. In a jealous rage she curses Princess Aurora so that the young beauty falls into a deep sleep. But in Disney’s 2014 remake, Maleficent isn’t really a bad guy. She’s just a mistreated and misunderstood fairy.

But, the thing is, we’re all bad guys. And God isn’t in the business of approving or applauding us—He’s in the grace and mercy business. The truth is, we need God to have mercy on us and show us grace—and to save us from our sins!

But if we think we’re good guys who don’t need God’s grace and mercy, do we ever have a chance of being a good guy in His sight?

Well, let’s go back and look at today’s readings again.

In the Old Testament reading, were Cain and Abel both conceived in sin? Yes they were—

that means there were both bad guys. Did God show mercy to Cain after he murdered his brother? Yes He did. He put a mark on Cain to protect him from anyone who would attack him.

In the Epistle reading, if you asked Paul if he was a good guy, what would he say? He's already told us the answer to that question. In First Timothy, Paul wrote, "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

Did Paul think he was a good guy? Not at all! Paul knew he lived under God's grace and mercy. Perhaps that's why he says, "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!" Paul was acutely aware of his sinful condition—which is why he rejoiced in God's grace and forgiveness—and he wanted that grace and forgiveness for others, as well—the grace and forgiveness that was won for him by the One Good Guy in human history—Jesus Christ.

The thing is, unless you humble yourself before God and acknowledge your sins before Him in repentance, you really don't need God's grace and mercy, and you really don't need forgiveness—which means, you really don't need Jesus. That's why our Gospel reading opens with these words: "Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated other with contempt..."

Both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector were bad guys. But which one trusted in himself, and which one acknowledged his sin and trusted God for mercy—and went home justified before God?

God alone is Good. That means, there's only one Good Guy in all of human history—Jesus Christ, God's Son in the Flesh. But upon this one Good Guy, God put all of the world's sins—and there on the cross Jesus became the worst Bad Guy in human history as He bore the wrath of God for all the bad guys who've ever lived. On the cross is where Jesus won God's grace and mercy and forgiveness for all of us.

For Christ's sake, God made the Tax Collector good by giving him faith that trusted in God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness won for Him by Christ Jesus—the grace, mercy and forgiveness that Paul rejoice in repeatedly. The Tax Collector was justified not because he had anything to offer God, but because he had nothing to offer God but a contrite heart. He was justified because, like Abraham, he trusted God's promise to be merciful to sinners, something the Pharisee in his self-righteousness didn't need.

Paul writes in Galatians that all who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. As one who has put on Christ, in faith, you acknowledge your sins before God, and in faith you trust that for Christ's sake, your sins are forgiven. And in baptismal faith you are justified—your are good in God's eyes because God has graciously made you good by giving you the righteousness of the One Good Guy, Jesus Christ.

In an age of affirmation, where there are no bad guys, where no one wears a black hat—it isn't fashionable to humble yourself before God and confess your sins and your need for God's mercy. But, if God saved you because you're good, then He really wouldn't be a gracious God—and Jesus wouldn't have had to die for your sins—and like the Pharisee, you'd have a whole lot to brag about.

But your goodness can't take away sins. Your goodness can't win God's favor because no one is good. Only God is Good—and in His goodness and mercy, He's given you the One Good Guy whose goodness did defeat sin and win God's mercy—Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior. In Him, you are a good guy because your sins are washed away.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.