

Unity Oldland Methodist Church

West Street, Oldland Common, Bristol. BS30 9QS

10am Sunday 26 October 2025 (Bible Sunday)

Lectionary:

Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22

Psalms 84:1-7

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

Sermon

When I woke up this morning I trusted that my clocks, my Alexas and my computers had all done their jobs and reset their time. I enjoyed the feeling of that extra hour in bed, but I had to trust that these tools had done what they should.

Of course, any worries I might have had were put at ease because the clock radio announced the time with the news so I knew that I was OK.

Amazingly the dogs reset their times and so didn't hassle me to get up early.

On Thursday night Coco and I went to her agility class. I tell her to sit and wait and then I walk off down the course. I have to trust her to stay in the right position until I call her at which point she jumps the first jump, then runs up and over the A frame, by which time she's already caught up with me! I tell her to 'go' and she jumps the next jump she can see, and the next one then I call out 'tunnel' and she runs on into the tunnel (giving me time to take a shortcut to the next jump. I call out 'left' and as she emerges from the tunnel she turns sharp left, sees another jump and takes it, followed by the next one. As she takes off I call out left again and she lands, and turns to run through the next tunnel. I again call 'left' as she emerges from the tunnel and tell her 'poles' so that she zigzags through a row of poles before turning left again, jumping a jump and running up and along the 'dog walk'. After the bottom of the dog walk she runs on to take two more jumps and finishes.

Throughout all of this, I have been spared the need to run too much because I have been able to trust her to follow commands, and she has trusted me to be telling her the right things to do – and not asking her to do anything that might harm her.

At the end of the run she comes immediately to me to receive her small treat, before she then tears across the arena to our trainer Rianne, where she sits nicely knowing she will receive an additional reward from her.

There's something wonderful about the relationship between us that means she can perform to a high level. It ties into that trusting relationship that we are offered by God.

At present I am seeking employment – it's scary not knowing how I might be paying my bills in future. It certainly won't be via any 'benefits'. I'm not sure where these stories of people living a life of luxury on the dole come from – what I'm getting won't cover the

dogs' insurance premium let alone my living costs. Apparently I could claim Universal Credit to top up my income, but according to the website I used I would get about £1.20 per month that way!

So I am left to lean on my faith in God and believe that as I can look back through my career and clearly see God's hand in things, I can therefore trust God to have a plan for me going forward. So far I have had a number of interviews but unsuccessfully – that's not God's fault, I have to own my performance – but it is good to see that there are vacancies coming up, I am being able to apply and I am securing interviews. It is about trusting God that when the right one comes up I will be able to secure it.

I recently saw a job which would have been working for the church. I was torn whether to even look at it, not least because the pay was less than the job I just left – and I struggled to get by in that role. However, as I headed to an appointment I was reminded of our covenant prayer;

“I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;”

And felt God was telling me that I needed to be obedient, that I needed to trust in God.

So although I really didn't want to go for the job in question, I put together an application, and sent it in.

Interestingly, despite my having held massively more senior roles, and having everything they were looking for, I have not been shortlisted.

But I do feel that, like Abraham being willing to offer up his son for sacrifice, I have been obedient – I have trusted God.

The result being that I have been called for interview for three other jobs – all substantially senior to this other role – and, I believe, in part because I was obedient and willing to take a much lower role.

When I was received into membership of the Methodist Church, my father wrote in a book I was given a text that was also important in my early experience in the Boys' Brigade;

Proverbs 3:5-6

⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is addressing a group of people who trusted in themselves, who believed that they were the righteous ones, and who regarded others with contempt. Their stance was that they had it sussed and so Jesus told them the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

The pharisee stands in clear view, and earshot, of the people and utters a totally self-aggrandising prayer – thanking God that he was such a wonderful person – that he was better than so many others – thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors. He even fasted TWICE a week and tithed his income.

I sort of imagine this Pharisee as the Donald Trump of his day ‘I’m so wonderful, I’m the most wonderful person you could want to meet, there’s no one more wonderful than me’. It must have been such a shock to him to discover the Nobel Peace Prize committee thought maybe there was someone (or many someones) more deserving of their award.

Whereas the tax collector was very conscious of his own shortcomings. He stands quietly out of the way, maybe not even feeling that he was really worthy of being in the place to start with, and without daring to look up towards God, begs God’s mercy because he is a sinner.

Jesus tells us that it is this man, the one who approaches God, conscious that he is not worthy to do so, and begs God’s forgiveness.

I am reminded of the prayer we sometimes pray at communion;

We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your abundant and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord, who always delights in showing mercy. ...

You see, in the words of Mike Rayson, an Australian Methodist Minister and singer/songwriter, God does not love us because we are worthy, we are worthy because we are loved.

It is only by the grace of God that we can be accepted into God’s kingdom.

According to Jesus, the tax collector goes home justified, knowing he is accepted and right with God, before he's changed a single thing about his life. He's still a tax collector. He is still collaborating with the occupying force. He hasn't quit his job or paid anyone back. But in that moment of honest self-realization, grace meets him exactly where he is.

Here's what's world-shattering: grace doesn't stop there. That justified tax collector, now knowing he's unconditionally loved, will return to his tax booth the next day transformed. He'll start really seeing the people he has been exploiting, feeling their struggles and transforming his ways. Real transformation begins after justification, not before.

In our Old Testament, Jeremiah, reading – the people confess their sin, acknowledge their failings and beg that God not forsake them. They pray God not break the covenant relationship because they recognise that their hope is set on God alone.

This is the starting point for faith, the starting point to come to God.

If we believe we are perfect, then we have no need of God. If we arrogantly profess that we can do it all on our own, then we do not need God.

It is only at that point when we realise that we are not as good as we'd like to think we are. That we recognise we have failed, we have done things we shouldn't have done, we have failed to do things we should have done.

Only as we hit a spiritual rock bottom, can we reach out towards God and say 'save me'.

This is where I part company with some many old school evangelists. You remember those who would say "Come to Jesus and everything will be OK", "Come to Jesus and life will be easy".

THEY ARE LIARS!!

I have yet to meet anyone who can in truth say that their life became easy when they became a Christian... usually it's the opposite.

Even in the case of someone like Paul, we read in the epistle this morning that he had ended up in prison, directly because of his faith in Jesus, and yet he is able to celebrate that he has fought the fight, finished the race, kept the faith and will therefore receive the promised crown of righteousness. Not because it was easy, not because God made things simple for him, but because God stood by him – God gave him strength.

As Jesus promises us "I am with you always, even to the end of time".

It is that great promise that we are given – not of an easy life – but of an assurance that God will be with us. It is that promise upon which we build our trust, our faith.

A former colleague of mine Revd Adrian Roux, wrote this of this week's lectionary, particularly the change in the tax collector;

This is where personal holiness meets social holiness. You can't experience God's justifying grace and then walk past food banks thinking "not my problem." You can't be perfected in love while remaining comfortable with systems that oppress the vulnerable.

In a world of hunger, homelessness, vulnerability and abuse, of resurgent nationalism and economic inequality ... We need a church that looks diverse, sounds humble, and embodies radical inclusivity. We need to join in the work that is already happening. The Spirit is already breaking boundaries. Grace is already flowing freely. Systems of oppression are already being challenged.

We simply have to join in with what God is already doing.

Because the one who goes home justified isn't the one who's got it all figured out. It's the one who knows they need grace: grace sufficient to begin the journey, grace sufficient to make the journey.

As Paul ends his letter – to God be the glory forever and ever. AMEN