

“Let’s Get Real”, Brenda Gatlin, Luke 18:9-14, April 10, 2016

We’ve been working through several messages, and I think we’ve been asking ourselves the question, “How healthy do you want to be?” since the first of the year. And for many weeks we’ve been talking about what does that look like as individuals and as we come together how it creates this really healthy community. And so today, I’m privileged to share about something that is one of my absolute favorite distinctions and a core value in the Vineyard movement and today I want to talk about being real. Let’s get real. Being real means that we want the Vineyard, we want the church community here to be a place where people feel safe to say, “I need help! I need help through life, I need help with this issue, I need to know what God things about this. I’m not really okay right now.”

This is one of the reasons why I can even be a pastor is that we’re in a movement where I don’t have to look perfect all the time or hyper-spiritual all the time but I can just be honest and I can be real and I’m excited about this because I have always had a heart for this, but over the last few years, especially I’ve really been going through some personal transformation. I’ve mentioned this in a couple different settings or teachings. God has just shown me that it’s so easy to have a public self and a private self. This public self is who everybody wants me to be, a little bit more loveable, quite functional and as much as possible, hiding brokenness. But the authentic me sits here in the middle of fears and failures and flaw and is a lot more messy. And I’ve been asking God to deconstruct this and help me lead out of my more authentic self. And so, it’s really been a big part of my journey, and it has changed my life and my relationships to being somebody who can actually receive love at a deeper level, receive God’s love and grace at a deeper level, and then of course, that helps me to love other people a lot better as well.

And so, we’re just constantly wanting this community of believers to be a place where honesty and authenticity and real relationship can happen. But so often, churches teach us something else. So often, maybe your experience has been this: you have to look like a church-goer to go to church! And there’s quite a bit of focus on external things and it’s not so much what’s going on in our hearts and we’re really afraid a lot of times if people really knew all my needs and all my struggles and who I really am. You know, I probably shouldn’t even be here! And my comeback is, well if you can’t go to church, where can you go? If you can’t go to church and be loved for your junk, where can you go and be loved, because it’s not gonna happen in most contexts in the world.

And so love when I hear about people say about their experience here: “You know, I thought that when you guys got to know me, when you found out or I asked for prayer for my struggles with pornography or addictions or whatever that surely, that would change the way you treated me or how much love I felt from people here and the honeymoon would be over. But the more that people actually get to know me, the more they see who I really am, they still love me! Not less, but actually they show me grace and they help me get to Jesus. Last week praying for somebody

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who's been struggling with something for quite a while, they just, after we prayed, they just looked at me and said, "Thank you for not giving up!" I said, "I'm not giving up! Jesus isn't giving up. We have to keep coming to him and if we don't give up, we always win in this journey that we're on of overcoming our sin and our brokenness.

Lots of years ago, years and years ago, there was a bumper sticker that advertised Vineyards across the nation. And it said, "Come as you are, and you'll be loved." And it kind of makes me nervous when I see a church that looks really super polished. You know, everyone in the church looks like an elite Christian person because, honestly, one of the problems of becoming a church that is super polished on the exterior, it's kind of like in scripture God talks about whitewashed tombs looking pretty good on the outside; but when somebody needs to come to church who has some brokenness who is acknowledging their need for God, they kinda go, "I don't think I can go there, because I look too broken." So, a great church can look messy. And when I see folks that look as kinda broken and messy as me it makes me smile! And it makes God smile, because we're all just like one beggar helping another beggar to Jesus.

So let me pray, and we'll jump in here to our passage in Luke 18. Father, I know that you love to take away those things that keep real relationship from happening in our lives. And I know that you love it when we command learn how to be vulnerable and honest and that there's really good fruit from that and so God, would you help us today, even as we sit here, just to be as honest as we possibly can with you. And let you go to places in our lives that maybe we haven't let you go before. I ask you to just put power on the truth and that it would bring freedom in Christ's name, Amen.

Alright, let's read Luke 18 here. I'm going to start with verse 9 and read through 14. This is a parable that Jesus is telling, which a parable is meant to be laid alongside our lives, and it's to teach us something about life. And so put that lens on as we look at Luke 18:9-14. ⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'¹⁴ [Jesus speaking] "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

And I'll follow up with this: 1 Peter 4:6 says "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." You know, transparency and just being real, being authentic, being honest, you know why it's so hard for us? Because it takes humility. And I've learned that over the past couple years that there's many, many times that my life looks super messy. And it's humbling. But when I'm honest with the people in the situation or in my life, they come around me and they help me get to Jesus and it's hard! It's really hard to, at that moment, not have them look and view me as the strong woman leader that I would like to be, or that I pray I could become, because it's just very humbling to be seen in our needs and in our brokenness. And that's exactly why it's very,

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very hard for us.

It's interesting to look at who Jesus is telling this parable to. So, let's take a look at the first character, the Pharisee. Pharisee was an extraordinarily religious man in first century Palestine, who belonged to a very strict sect of Judaism and they were very well known for their legalism and following rules very well, and they were very carefully observing this long list of rules that pretty much dealt with everything that you can imagine in daily life. And other people would look at them and perceive them to be righteous and very law-abiding Jews.

But the thing is, a Pharisee knew it. And they knew their accomplishments, and they really were quite proud of them. And so this guy that Jesus is telling us about, he really believed that he was better than anyone around him. And he was thanking God for it. Notice that it says, "he prayed to himself." I think that's interesting that his prayers really weren't even that much directed at God. And he looked around and he saw people much more needy places than him, and he was pretty proud of his extraordinary religious behavior. And let's put that in a modern day context. I think a lot of us would look at our lives, see someone else with a lot more brokenness, a lot more need, and we might assess ourselves in the same way. But it doesn't impress God because it's self-righteousness.

And he is only able to say what he's been able to say because of his own accomplishments. He was so dependent on himself to be okay, to prop himself up. And he really couldn't see anything wrong with what he prayed and there was this deception there that made him feel like what he was doing was right and he thought it was good to be without need. He didn't see himself as a person that needed grace. And so the Pharisees were blinded, just simply by their pride and self-sufficiency. And so, today's Pharisee might pray, "I thank you that I'm not like people who take drugs, or people who commit adultery, or people who abuse substances. I don't have those problems and I thank you that I don't do that things that other people do morally or ethically or in business or in religion. Thank you Lord that I'm here! Doesn't that count for something that I'm in church and I'm reading the bible and I'm giving money, I write that check every week . . ." These are all great achievements, but they also keep us from seeing our need for God. And God calls that pride.

Have you ever looked at somebody that has a lot of brokenness, it's pretty obvious in their life for different reasons. At least externally, it looks like that. You can see that they're struggling. And it's interesting to notice your first response because the heart of God, our first response would be empathy and compassions. The heart of a Pharisee, our first response is going to be judgment. You know, it's a great conversation, even now, to have in our current culture, because we have these responses that just come pretty quickly to us. And I'm really wanting to talk about humility but let me just say this about judgment. The minute that you judge someone, you can't love them. The minute that you start to judge, you have all of God's love and his compassion just exited. And there's no Jesus in that because that's just not how Jesus sees needy people. And it's interesting to think about that when we notice that judgment in us. We're making a choice in that moment not to love like Christ does. And I think there is a little bit of Pharisee in all of us. We're just not self-aware enough to see it. So that's the Pharisee.

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The Tax Collector, he's the agent of the Roman Government who collected all the taxes from the Jews and the Jews hated the tax collectors because they're the ones that brought in all the money so that the Romans could continue to occupy their homeland. So, side-by-side, we have one person who's kinda near the top of the social ladder and the other person who's actually at the bottom. And Jesus puts these two people side by side, and he picks someone who was hated in their culture, and in contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector in this story was ruthlessly honest! He was a sinner and he knew it! He reflected that in everything. He had this painful honesty, and everything from his posture and the fact that he stood at a distance, and his gestures and then of course his words. It was not even common for tax collectors to come into the temple because they were already rejected by religious people of the day.

And so he comes in, and Jesus sets up this story, and he [the tax collector] has no hope, and he has no righteousness, and he has no good works to speak of. Nothing, but to come and throw himself on the mercy of God and say, "God! Be merciful on me! I'm a sinner I shouldn't even be here! You're my only hope, my only chance is your mercy!" I think, even in our culture, we kinda consider that kind of act of admitting, "Have mercy on me, I'm a sinner!" is considered foolish, and somewhat repulsive sometimes. And we have gone to great lengths to cover up most of the things that aren't going very well in our lives.

And I would bet most of us could say that we feel like we're expected to go to work and be with our family and come to church and especially when we're around other believers that we're supposed to look like we've got it together. We're supposed to look pretty great on the outside. And really, there shouldn't be anything that terrific or terrible going on inside because somebody's gonna look at me and I'm gonna be judged. And isn't it true that the real reason hard to be absolutely honest about our present condition, what's really going on is because is we're afraid that somebody is gonna look down on us and compare us and judge us and say, "Whew, I'm not as bad off as he is... or she is." See we judge others, and because we have that response, we figure we have it coming to us, and we think that people are probably gonna judge us too. And I think we ... there's something in our culture that has almost taught us to sorta despise people who are too needy, or too broken, or too vulnerable because we don't like to see it in ourselves. We despise ourselves. And so because we despise it in ourselves, we believe that if someone really sees how needy I truly am then they're gonna despise me too. I know that even over the past few months, I've going through, as I said, some transformation, but there's been some things going on in my life that have elevated and highlighted my brokenness. And I've been pretty overwhelmed by the fact that I'm not as emotionally mature as I should be in certain situations and I don't feel like I have the right responses when I get hurt. I don't handle loss that great, so I've been sorta sitting in this place of feeling my brokenness kinda in my face. You just sorta feel stuck! And I honestly have had the enemy, just in the middle of that go, "Yeah, you should just quit, 'cause you're just a loser." He uses that stuff against us! I've had the body of Christ, I've had people come around me, and I've had to say out loud some of those things that I was afraid I'd be rejected for. I was afraid that people would judge me for. And you know what's interesting? As loud as that lie is, "They're gonna reject you, if they find out! You're disqualifying yourself if you're honest." As loud as they voice is, when you push through the lie,

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when you press into it, when you take the risk to trust God and the trust his people, you know how people responded? With grace. And with God's heart. And they've helped me get to Jesus and they've broken the power of those lies off of me and they've helped me get free from that overwhelming sense of brokenness. And so I'm not saying you should tell everyone everything, but I think you need to find a few people who will help you get to Jesus and walk through that stuff with you.

The bible says many times that God draws near to the broken and the contrite spirit. To be contrite means to be broken or to be crushed. Listen to this: Psalm 34:18, "The Lord draws near to the brokenhearted, and he saves those who are crushed in spirit." That's where the Lord is, he's right there in the middle of all that mess, of all that need, with us. Isaiah 66:2 says, "This is the one I esteem; he who is humble and contrite spirit, and trembles at my word." And Isaiah 57:15, "I live with him who is contrite and humble in spirit to revive the spirit of the humble and revive the heart of the contrite ones." So. There's Jesus. He's right there with the broken. He's not hanging out with the proud. He opposes the proud. He opposes that righteous, self-righteous Pharisee and he's hanging out with the tax collector. The Pharisee and the tax collector, they're so different. One is looking so good and proud with all of these achievements and the other is so broken and so humble. And then God comes in and he says, "I see that humble heart." And then he lifts it up, he honors it and he says, "You're the one who is right with me today because you're the one who is willing to acknowledge, and willing to say, 'I'm broken. I have a contrite spirit.'"

And what would the Father say to us, what would he say to us if we would only just come to him and be honest? I think he would say, "I want you to trust me. And I want you to be honest with me, and I want you to stop hiding from me because I love you! I'm trying to love you but you're over here trying to make yourself look loveable!" Here is a test of our heart: Whatever we're feeling in our relationship with people is a pretty good indicator of what's going on with our relationship with God. If we have a hard time being honest and transparent and trusting of people, I can guarantee you that's a pretty good picture of how transparent that we're being in our relationship with God. Now transparency and honesty happens to be a mark of spiritual maturity. So while you're feeling like you're immature because you have so much brokenness, the fact that you're being transparent about it is a little mature! I think being intentional and purposeful about acknowledging that and the more spiritually mature we are the more quickly we start to admit that we need God and everything we have is by his grace and that we're living out of this place of broken, sin-filled lives.

We see this in scripture as the apostle Paul grew more mature as a follower of Christ. He also had this much more realistic sense of his weaknesses. Galatians 2:6, he's been following the Lord just for a little while here: "As for those who seem to be important, whatever they were makes no difference to me." A little bit callous sounding right? And then about 7 years later, 1 Corinthians 15:9 he says, "I am the least of these apostles." And then about 15 years following Christ, "I am less than the least of all of God's people." And then about 25 years in he says, "I am the worst of all sinners!" You see that he's getting a little bit more transparent. The longer he follows Christ, the longer that he walks on this spiritual journey, he learns that the only thing that really matters

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is that I'm authentic before God and his people.

You know, there are several signs that show up when we're not very intentional about being authentic and humble at the feet of Jesus. And the first thing is that we just hold on to anger rather than process or deal with it biblically. And we also find ourselves grumbling and complaining a lot. We get agitated easier and we have a hard time letting go of offenses because can you see the pride in those red flags? There's pride that's kind of raised up around our view of ourselves and so we start to get mad about other people's weaknesses. We start to grumble and complain about other people's weaknesses and when somebody offends us, by golly, we're gonna let 'em have it. And we're gonna hold onto that grudge. There's no humility in that. There's no humility in those red flags and so it's the opposite of what God wants for us.

There's different ways that we try to escape this, being broken and humble at the feet of Jesus. I think these are helpful. Sometime we run. Some of us, we bury our pain in some kind of addictive behavior or we avoid life by just pouring ourselves into something that seems apparently good like our children, our work or a project, or other really good things. But that's not that far off from what the Pharisee did in that parable. And all in all, we're just escaping so that we don't have to come crawling to the feet of the cross, to the feet of Jesus and say, "Wow, I'm broken, I need you! I need your grace in my life today!" So we just sort of conveniently avoid it.

Another way we respond sometimes is we fight and some of us choose to become angry or bitter or even violent because life isn't going our way. We might express that by even self-destructive things like cutting or self-harm or take out our anger on misguided politicians or doctrinally imperfect Christians or spend hours criticizing everything and everybody. Or we just flat out get angry and mad at God because he's not answering our prayers or he's not ruling the world in a way that seems right to us. So we fight.

And then some of us hide. We hide and we build our lives in ways that we just sort of keep covering up how damaged and how broken we are, how fractured, how frail, how limited we are, how imperfect we are. We hide and we talk about our successes and we dodge hard questions and we hide behind this false sense of worth and value that if we look put together on the outside that nobody's really ever going to figure out what's going on on the inside. We all look at life's circumstances and then we respond in different ways. And I usually run at first, and then I stop and turn around and fight, so I got like two of those going on at the same time. But escape, and so you have to ask yourself, "What do I do? What is my instinct, how do I escape from just being found broken at the feet of Jesus? Humble, honest."

And everyone is broken, I think we know that in our core. We're working overtime to make it look like we're not and the more we point out other people's flaws, the better we feel about ourselves and you know, Gino talked about that last week. If you missed it last week you gotta listen to the podcast. Gino was here from Chicago and he preached an awesome message for us last week [April 3], he's a great friend, a great pastor. And you should listen to that. He talked about how we compare ourselves to each other and how it just tears down who God made us to be. And it's just sort of this common thread in all of humanity. We can try to deny it; we can wish

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it wasn't so. Here's the good news: The good news is that God has always used broken people. He has always used cracked pots to show his love and one of the reasons why, it says in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels [that's us] that the excellence and power may be of God and not of us." See, when we're broken and God flows through us to work and to move and to love people and to express his heart, everyone goes, "Well, I know that's God 'cause it aint you!" It just points to God!

Listen to this list of cracked pots that God used in the bible. This is taken from the book, The Emotionally Healthy Church by Peter Scazzero:

John Mark deserted Paul, Timothy had ulcers, Hosea's wife was a prostitute, Amos' only training was farming, Jacob was a liar, David had an affair, he murdered, he abused power, his armor didn't fit right. Naomi was a widow, Paul was a persecutor, Moses had a short fuse, he murdered someone and had a speech impediment. Jonah ran from God's will, Gideon and Thomas both doubted. Jeremiah was depressed and suicidal. Elijah was burned out. John the Baptist was a loudmouth. Martha was a worrywart. Noah got drunk. Solomon was too rich, Jesus was too poor, Abraham was too old and David was too young. Peter was afraid of death and Lazarus was dead.

The Bible is full of it! Bunch of broken, messed up people being used by God! Our lives are the same, our lives are page upon page upon page of mishaps and mistakes and anxieties and fears and failures and And it just runs through the story of every single person's life! But God, in his grace, says, "I can work with that! I can work with that. I love you! In fact, you know, I can even love other people through you..." And it doesn't mean that we encourage ourselves to encourage ourselves to stay the way we are. We're constantly pressing in and asking God to heal us and grow us and change us. But admitting the truth and being honest about what's really going on, that's the key starting point of change. Because change doesn't happen until we get honest about where we're starting from. Otherwise, you're not building on the place that you really need to.

There's a chart on the back of your program that I put there. These are some notes and they kinda look like this on the screen and it's taken again from this book, The Emotionally Healthy Church. I wanted you to have that chart because it contrasts the differences between, on the left, a person who is proud and defensive to a person who's authentic and humble. And you know, I would look at that and pray over that. Pray into each one of those and ask the Lord to show you, "Where's my starting point? How do I get real and honest here? How do I let you come and move me and change me?" Because I think we have to just start getting comfortable with being honest just to begin to see any change at all. Change is going to come through that kind of vulnerability, that kind of honesty before God and others. And as I said, one of my motivations for actually becoming more authentic over the past few years, and as painful and as messy as I've had to be, as vulnerable as I've felt, many times I've seen more change in the last three or four years than in years before that!

So, self-awareness is the starting point of all of our life change. Frankly, it means that we have to be a little more intentional. And emotionally and spiritually healthy churches, people and the community and leaders, they're learning how to live out that kind of brokenness, that kind of

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vulnerability because it's safe to do that! And living in a community where it's normal to admit we have failures, we have pain, we have shortcomings... you know, that's a gift because it creates an environment where we can have questions, we can struggle and we can know what we're gonna find. We know we're gonna find in our small group, or in our friendships that someone is gonna point us to Jesus no matter how ugly it gets or no matter what comes out, they're still gonna stick with us. They're not gonna judge us, they're gonna walk through it with us, they're gonna help us get to Jesus, they're gonna help us walk through the healing that we need without making judgments. And I love that about small groups. You know, it's hard to be honest with all of us in this room because we're.. you know..too many of us. But in a small group setting, you know what people say? "Yeah, I went to small group for the first time and I was kinda quiet 'cause I don't know what happens there. But then someone started sharing about their stuff, and then the next person went and boy, ooh...wow...ooh they're really messed up.' And then the next person went and then I thought, 'Oh wow! It's okay! I can say what's going on 'cause that what people do here. They just pray for each other and they point each other to Jesus. They don't judge each other.'"

And so just going through the motions, that doesn't please God. A flawless performance, that's not what he wants, that's not the most important thing to him. You know, broken people, transparent people, vulnerable people who are ready for love, ready for healing will never go unnoticed by him, 'cause that's where he lives! He's close to those people of contrite spirit. The Pharisee, he thinks he's so good, you know, he's judged by Jesus to be pathetic! And the tax collector who thought he was so bad, he's justified by Jesus. And God says he's right with the Father today, just for being honest. Just having an honest confession. And so the Pharisee is trusting in himself, trusting in his own goodness but the tax collector throws himself *completely* at the mercy of God and what God can do for him. God's goodness is what made him worthy.

And we may disguise ourselves, we might be fooling someone, but we're not fooling God! And I think if we're honest enough just to say, with the tax collector, "God if you don't come, I'm in trouble here. I'm gonna sin today! Something's gonna come outa me that's gonna hurt someone. I'm desperate for you, if you don't come!" I like The Message version of the bible. The last verse in The Message says this, "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're gonna end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself [like authentic and honest] you will become more than yourself." Why don't you guys stand up with me if you will?

We always take time to pray for each other at the end of all of our teaching and it's just because that's when God gets to come and do what he wants and that's our way of responding to God. I'd like to invite our folks who pray to come on up at this time. There's a couple things I think God's doing today. I think some of us have walked in and out of environments where we felt judged or maybe we were the one doing the judging. I feel like if we just ask God to change us in that, and give us his heart, that we would see people the way he sees them, I feel like that's something that God will do, he'll put his heart in us today to see people the way that he sees them; people in need.

And then I also think that because we've had some bad experiences, I think it's hard to trust. It's

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hard to trust people. We don't know what to expect, we don't know what people will do. We've seen people be critical. And it really does amaze me that when I take the risk and press through that lie that people are going to reject me, how often people respond with grace. I don't think it's just because I'm me, I think it's because in God's people dwells the Holy Spirit. Jesus comes out of us. You know, I think it's actually refreshing for us to see somebody who's willing to trust us so we hold that tenderly and we help people get to Jesus. And I feel like if you wanna be that type of person who responds that way, you wanna hold people in their brokenness before the Lord without judgment, you need to come and let us pray over that today because that could really be a powerful ministry that you get to extend God's heart to the people in their place of need and find compassion.

So Father, we need these things. We know we're not good at transparency, we know we're not very trusting of you or each other and God we want more. We want more trust supernaturally deposited in us today. That we would take risks, that we would press through lies, that we would come humbly before you and before others and not try to be somebody we're not, Lord. Father, if we've struggled with that, if we've been wearing masks, if we've been upholding some kind of a false self, we just want to come before you. We want to come boldly before you and take it off and ask you to teach us how to be authentic and genuine and real. And God, where it feels scary and oppressive and, 'I don't know...it's too big of a leap. It's too big of a risk!' I ask that the Holy Spirit would come on us right now and empower and take that fear and break the power of that lie from the enemy off of us. Help us to be a place where broken people can come and find you, Jesus. Help us to be that kind of people. We need you. Whatever you need is, we never want you to walk out of here without getting prayer, no matter what it is. It doesn't have to be something that I name or invite you to get prayer for. You know, God's already spoken things to you and so you can just come anytime. We're gonna worship here for a couple songs and you can just come up and we'd love to pray with you today before you leave. Thanks so much for being with us today.