

**Series: Unhindered**  
**“The Hindrance of Unrepentance”**

**Isaiah 59:1-3; Luke 18:9-14**

This morning we continue our study called “Unhindered” where we are focusing on the fact that God wants us to live unhindered, free from obstacles and distractions that will prevent us from living a victorious life in Christ. We can all understand what it means to be hindered in something. It means that we are prevented, deterred, or impeded by something. We use this word in many ways. We may say, “I intended to be on time for my meeting, but the road work hindered me from arriving on time”, or “I wanted to experience something, but I was hindered from doing so.” There are many ways that we use the word, but each time we are describing an obstacle or situation that hindered our plans or progress. I am convinced that many Christians are living their lives ineffectively because they are hindered. A Christian is someone who has believed in Jesus Christ and confessed Him as Lord and Savior. This means that they have received God’s gift of eternal life by faith. However, this doesn’t automatically mean that they are living the abundant, victorious life that is available to all who have received eternal life. There are many Christians who are living their life defeated, discouraged, and disheartened. Simply put, there is something in their lives that is hindering them from living the life that Jesus has called them to.

There are many things that may cause us to be hindered. These things hinder us from being effective in our prayers and from other aspects of Christian growth. Paul understood this personally. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 he confessed that he wanted to go to the city of Thessalonica to preach the Gospel, but he sadly said, “Yet Satan hindered us.” He knew what it was like to be prevented and deterred from something. He also understood how Satan uses various hindrances to get us off course to divert us away from the path that God wants us to go. This is why he would look at the Christians in **Galatians 5:7** and say, “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?” Paul was saying, “You were doing so well. You were living for Jesus. You were honoring Him in your life and actions, but something happened. Something or someone hindered you, and you’re now going the wrong the direction.” Some of the hindrances we face, like unexpected circumstances and trials, we have absolutely no control over. However, most of the things the Bible identifies as hindrances are things that we do have control over. We can’t control what may happen to us or what may come against us, but we can control how we respond. The quickest way I know to discover the specific things that will hinder us is to study the things that hinder us from growing in a right relationship with the Lord. So far, we have discovered three things that hinder our Christian walk – disobedience to God’s Word, division with others, and doubt. Today we come to a fourth hindrance that we must take note of and, with God’s help, overcome.

Show Text (Isaiah 59:1-3)

I am curious this morning, have you ever repented of your sins and turned to God? If so, is there anything in your heart and life today that you need to repent of? If not, what is keeping you from repentance? The verses that we have read this morning were written by the prophet Isaiah nearly

700 hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Isaiah wrote continuously about God's grace and faithfulness to provide a Savior for all the world. In fact, nobody in the Old Testament wrote more about the coming Savior than Isaiah. It seems at every turn he wanted the people to remember God's grace towards them. However, the other main theme of the book of Isaiah is the rebellion of the people. In fact, God gave Isaiah discernment about the true condition of Israel. On the outside the Israelites had an appearance of righteousness and Godliness, but it was all a cheap facade. So, all throughout the book he called the people of Israel to obey God with all their heart, not just through their empty actions. He desired that those who heard and read his words would be convicted to turn from wickedness and turn to God for forgiveness and healing. We see this clearly in the text that we have read this morning. He was calling the people to repent of their sins. He reminded them that God was able to save them. In fact, there is no place that He can't reach to save someone from. There is no distance too great and no person too far that can't be saved. Not only is God's arm able to move and save, His hearing is crystal clear. His ear is attuned to those who talk to Him. Isaiah is clearly showing that God desires that all people would turn away from their sin and turn to Him. This is what repentance is all about. **Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change in action.** To repent means to literally turn away from one thing and to turn to another. Spiritually, repentance is turning away from our sin and turning to the Savior. And, God desires that all mankind would repent. **2 Peter 3:9** assures us, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." This is exactly what Isaiah was saying. However, we see the sad response to God's call in verses 2-3. God called them to repentance so that they would be saved, but they refused to repent. Instead they chose to go their own direction, do their own thing, live their own way, and continue to cling to their sins and, as a result, they were hindered from all that God intended for them. In fact, He would not even hear their prayers. This is what David concluded in **Psalm 66:18**, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." In other words, being unrepentant over our sins causes a major hindrance in our lives. David testified of this and Isaiah warned of this. It shouldn't surprise us, today, to discover that Jesus Himself said the same exact thing in Luke 18.

Show Text (Luke 18:9-14)

As we turn our attention to Luke 18, we find that Jesus was speaking to a group of Pharisees and was teaching in parables. Parables were illustrations and verbal pictures that were used to teach spiritual truths. As He taught the crowd, He painted a picture that had a powerful message for the people in His day, but certainly for us today as well. Jesus told the story about two men who had little in common. The first man was a Pharisee. He was very religious and well-known. The second man was a publican, a tax collector. He, too, was likely well-known, but not for his religion. Tax collectors in that day were some of the most despised people in the land. They were assigned with the responsibility of collecting the various taxes from the people. They were well-known for raising the percentages and pocketing the additional funds. They were typically crooks who took advantage of all the people, especially the less fortunate. So, these men have very little in common except for the fact that they both went to the temple pray. It is in how they prayed that we see the importance of repentance. As we study this parable, I want us to see three truths about repentance.

## I. The Problems of Repentance (vs. 9-12)

As the story unfolds, Jesus explains that the Pharisee went to the temple to pray. This should come as no surprise to us. The Pharisees were known for their prayers. I am not suggesting that they always prayed correctly, but they were certainly a people who prayed. This was true of this Pharisee as well. This Pharisee began to pray, and he did so with a good start. He first said, “God, I thank You.” Surely, this is a good way to start your prayer. In fact, the Bible is clear that we should give praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. **1 Thessalonians 5:17-18**, “Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” After this, however, things quickly went downhill. Notice what he is thanking God for. He says, “God, I thank You that I am not like other people.” In other words, he thanked God that he was so much better than everyone else. From there he has the audacity to tell God how good he really is. In fact, in just two verses he used the word “I” five times. Why? Because he was pridefully consumed with himself – his goodness, his merits, his experience, his morality, etc. As we read of this man, we read nothing of repentance. Why is this? Why was there no repentance on his part? It is true that God desires all to repent, but that isn’t merely what God desires. It is also what all mankind needs. Why? Because **Romans 3:23** explains, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All of us have sinned. This would have also been true of the Pharisee, but he apparently saw no need for repentance. I want us to consider three reasons, three things that hindered him from repentance.

### A. Self-Righteousness

The Pharisees were known for their rules and their standards of living. Frankly, they were a very legalistic people. They took God’s original commandments and ran with it. They added laws here and there which comprised their own standards of morality. They had approximately 613 laws that they lived by. So, outwardly speaking, they appeared to have their act together. In fact, they looked better, sounded better, and acted better than everyone else around them. But, listen closely to that statement. They **APPEARED** better than everyone else around them. This was one of the key problems with the Pharisees. They were living their lives focused on others, not on God. Notice how the Pharisee prayed. He said, “I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Do you hear the pride in his voice? I imagine he is praying in the temple loud and clear as others pass by. He is puffing up his chest. “God, I am so thankful that I am not like that thief over there, oh and that guy’s a cheat, I’m so glad I am not like him. I’m not an adulterer and I praise You, God, that I am not like this despicable tax collector.” Do you hear his self-righteousness? He assumed that since he hadn’t outwardly participated in these obvious sins then he must be better than everyone else. Since he hadn’t committed these specific actions, he thought he was fine.

This foolish Pharisee did what we often do. He looked at himself comparing himself to others, but his problem is that he was only looking at the outward appearance and not examining the most important part – his heart. All of us would do well when looking at ourselves to examine our desires and thoughts, not just our outward actions. If we don’t, we are sure to be hindered by our own self-righteousness. After all, **you won’t repent of sin if you deny its presence. You can’t turn from something that you deny. Romans 3:10**

declares, “As it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one.’ ” That is God’s final verdict and there is no good thing we can do to change that. Some will say, “But I don’t do all these bad things. I don’t curse, run around, lie, or steal.” That is commendable, but that doesn’t make anyone righteous. **Isaiah 64:6** says, “For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” In other words, just because you may abstain from things that are sinful doesn’t mean that you will be accepted by God. The Pharisee’s self-righteousness convinced him that he didn’t need to repent, and it is doing the same in many of our lives today.

## **B. Religion**

This is the reason for his righteous works. As I’ve already said, the Pharisees were well-known for being a religious group. They were significant leaders and influencers in Jesus’ day. They held strictly to the Levitical Law and did everything they could to follow every tradition. They were so devout and rigid in their approach they added law upon law, which basically created their own form of man-made morality. In other words, on the outside they appeared to be moral, noble, and respectable and they did all of this in the name of God. They verbally claimed to know God and to follow Him. In fact, they claimed that God was the reason for all these rules. They were the type of people that many would have looked up to and even aspired to be. However, there was a major problem with this. Religion, no matter how well-meaning or how well adhered to, will never bring someone to repentance where they turn away from sin and turn to Jesus Christ. The major problem with the Pharisee was that his religion blinded him from seeing his need to admit his wrong and turn to Jesus. His religion told him that he didn’t need to repent. His religion just gave him a big list of things to do. He looked at his actions and said, “Look at all the good I do.” He thought he was accepted by God because of what he did. He said, “I fast twice a week.” The Jews were all required to fast one day out of the year, on the Day of Atonement. This guy was so religious that he fasted twice every week. I doubt any of us here today can say that. Then he said, “I tithed of all that I get.” He tithed literally of every little thing that he received – corn, oil, cattle, herbs – everything. Can you imagine? A “tithe” means “a tenth.” Today, we recognize that as a Biblical principal for giving our “first-fruits” to God. But, do you give a tithe from every gift card that you receive? What about that birthday or Christmas present? Do you tithe on the amazing deal that you got at the store that saved you money? It sounds like he is trying to prove to God how blessed God must be to have this man coming to Him. Isn’t that sometimes like us? We sometimes act as if we are doing God a favor by doing things for Him. We may not say it, but we sometimes act as if we are doing God a favor by coming to church, serving in the Children’s Ministry, giving our offering, etc. Friend, I want to remind you that God doesn’t need us. He could call and choose anyone He desires. But He has chosen you, called you, forgiven you, and given you an opportunity. This man did some good things. He was more religious than most, but he was so religious and so convinced of his own holiness that he saw no need to repent of his sins. In his mind, he was perfectly fine.

This is the case with many today. Let me ask you, “Have you repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus Christ to be your personal Lord and Savior?” If you can’t answer that with conviction and certainty, then you still need to repent and be saved. Someone will often say, “Well, I’ve always been in church,” or “I grew up in a Christian family,” or “I’ve always believed in God.” There are many religious things that people refer to. But if there has not been a moment when you believed in Jesus and repented of your sins, then you are in the same sad, religious boat that the Pharisee found himself in. He was religious and self-righteous, but still there was no repentance and no personal relationship with Jesus.

### C. Rebellion

I believe that there is a third underlying reason that the Pharisee didn’t repent of his sin. I think that God is showing us that he would not repent because of the rebelliousness of his heart. We see that in many ways in these verses. First, we see it in what Luke summarized. He said, “Jesus told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves.” Then Jesus gave the picture of the Pharisee who refused to accept God’s way, but was intent on boasting of himself. Second, we see his rebellion in how he approached God. How many of us would be as boastful as this guy while hanging out with our friends? We might brag about the fish that we caught or the “glory days” of our high school careers, but I doubt we would boast about how much better we are than other people. And to think, this guy is boasting about how good he is...to God. Can you imagine such arrogance? Third, we see the sad summary that he is doing an outward religious work. He is praying, but Jesus said, “He was praying this to himself.” In other words, his heart was so hard that he didn’t even realize God wasn’t listening to his prayer.

Everything did indeed look good on the outside, but beyond the outward appearance there was a major problem. The problem was that God wasn’t looking at the outward appearance. He was looking at the heart. God did see the man’s outward actions, but God also knew the motives for those actions. He knew it all. This is why Jesus had to rebuke the Pharisees in **Matthew 23:23-28 (Show Text)**. They had an outward appearance of being right with God, but God saw the heart and He knew they were rebellious towards Him. This was the case with the Pharisee at the temple.

We must remember that God is certainly aware of the actions of man, but He also knows our every thought and motive. He sees it all. **Hebrews 4:12-13**, “For the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.” There is nothing that we can hide from Him. He already knows it all. So, instead of trying to cover it up with boastful claims and empty religion we should simply repent of our sins and turn to God. What should this look like? We see in the next verse.

## II. The Picture of Repentance (vs. 13)

I am not suggesting that every time someone repents it will look the same exact way, but I do believe that God gives us here a powerful picture of certain elements that will be present when there is genuine repentance.

### **A. Personal Remorse**

The very first thing we see about the tax collector is his deep conviction and shame. How do we see it? We see it in his countenance, his body language. The Scripture says, “He was standing some distance away.” Why was he standing at a distance? Because he felt unworthy. He didn’t feel that he had the right to be there. He didn’t feel that he belonged. He wasn’t as “good” as the Pharisee. He couldn’t pray as good. He didn’t live as good. He felt ashamed of himself and of his sins.

We also see his remorse by his sincere humility. Notice the next statement says, “He was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven.” He knew that he had done wrong. He knew that he hadn’t been living right. He didn’t need someone else to point out his sins, he was fully aware of them. He wasn’t there to deny them or get someone to justify his actions. He was there to get right with God. **John Flavel** said it well, “Those who know themselves cannot be proud, and those who know God can’t help but to be humble.” With his focus on God, he couldn’t be proud. He came humbly, unwilling to lift his eyes. **\*\*ILL:** Laine’s tender heart. Crying and sobbing. She didn’t want to look at me because she was ashamed. She felt she had let me down. I had to say, “Laine, look at me.” Then I had to take my hand and place it under her chin and lift it to see me. She hugged me and held on to me for what seemed like an hour. This is personal remorse.

### **B. Personal Responsibility**

This next phrase is interesting. It says that the tax collector was beating his breast. What in the world does this mean? Please know that that was not a Tarzan impersonation, nor was this a self-inflicted wound that he was giving himself as punishment. The picture is of a man who is so emotional over his sin that he can’t speak. He is in a place and moment where there is so much conviction and sorrow that he is overcome. He is reacting in a physical way to the grief that his sin has caused. By his actions, he is saying what Paul said, “Oh wretched man that I am.” If we are truly repentant of sin, there will be a Godly sorrow. **2 Corinthians 7:9a,10** describes it well, “I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God...For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.” That’s where this publican was. He had a Godly sorrow. Though he can’t speak and though he can’t find the words, he beats his breast as if to say, “It’s me. I’m the guilty party. I’m the one who has done wrong. It’s me.” He is owning his sin. He gives no excuses. He doesn’t compare himself to others. He is not worried about the Pharisee next to him. He isn’t thinking about what other people think of him. There is only one thing on his mind at that moment and that is the reality that he is a sinner.

### **C. Personal Request**

Finally, he gets his thoughts together and he begins to pray. He is clear enough to talk to God. What will he say? Will he give a pious, religious prayer? Will his prayer be eloquent? Will his prayer be as educated and informed as that of the Pharisees? Let's listen to this beautiful prayer. What does he pray? He says, "God, be merciful to me the sinner." **1) He admits that he is the sinner.** Notice the definite article "the." This little word adds much significance to his prayer. He didn't say "I am A sinner." The statement would've certainly been true, but simply stating "I am a sinner" would suggest that he is one of many. But remember, this man's attention wasn't on others. He wasn't concerned about how he looked before others. In this moment, it didn't matter where everyone else stood. The only thing he knew was the only thing he needed to know. He knew that he was "THE" sinner and that he needed God's mercy. As far as he knew, he could've been the only sinner in the temple that day, but even if he was the only one, he was going to get right with God. **2) He asked God to show him mercy.** He said, "God be merciful to me..." I praise God that He does show mercy. This tax collector wasn't perfect, but he understood that his greatest need was the mercy of God. What is mercy? It is undeserved compassion and forgiveness. The publican had done nothing to deserve such a blessing from God, but he admitted his guilt and asked in faith, believing that God is a good and gracious God Who would extend compassion and forgiveness.

### III. The Promise of Repentance (vs. 14)

What does God do with the prayers of repentance? What does God do when we are honest with Him and honest about ourselves? What does God do when we turn from our sin and ask Him for mercy, believing that He alone can forgive us? This prayer wasn't eloquent. There weren't even many words spoken, but that didn't matter to God. What mattered is that he came humble, honest, and repentant. David declared in **Psalm 51:17**, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." That is exactly what happened in the parable. Jesus said that when the publican left that day, he left justified. It means that his prayer had been heard, and God forgave him. God justified him because he came humbly in faith, confessing his sin and seeking God for mercy. God heard his prayer, showed him grace, and forgave him. The man came broken, but he left restored. He came in shame, but he left with peace. He came with guilt, but he left with grace. He came with hurt, but he left with hope. He came with sin, but he left with salvation. He came with burdens, but he left with blessings.

We recall clearly, though, that there were two men that went to the temple to pray. It really didn't matter how they arrived. Jesus was more focused on how they left. The proud Pharisee had come to the temple that day to gloat, not to get right with God. He came to boast about his own merits not to plead for mercy. He came to gain the respect of others, instead of coming to repent of sins. It is no surprise then to find that only one man left in a right relationship with God. One man left applauded by man, the other left accepted by God. One man left fooled, the other left forgiven. One man left condemned, the other left cleansed. For the Pharisee, his prayer was rejected that day. He came to the temple, prayed his arrogant prayer, and left the temple unrepentant, unchanged, and unforgiven. He was so focused on the shortcomings of others that he failed to see the reality of himself. He chose to ignore the sins in his own heart and life. Jesus, here, gives us a

summary principle in **verse 14**. I personally like how James sums it up in **James 4:6**, “But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ ”

What about you today? I believe that there are two types of people here this morning – those who will live and act like the Pharisee with his showy appearance and self-deception, and those who will come humbly and honestly with repentance like the publican. What Isaiah said years ago is still true. “The Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear.” He is ready to forgive, ready to heal, and ready to save, but we must come in faith and repentance. Sadly, Isaiah looked at the Israelites and knew that it was too late. They refused to humble themselves and repent. However, this isn’t the case with us today. We are alive. We are here and we have the opportunity to get right with God. **1 John 1:9** assures us, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Don’t let anything stop you from being right with God today.