

Leader's Guide: Failure, Hypocrisy, and an Honest Scorecard

Main Scripture - Luke 18:9–14

Supporting Scriptures - 1 John 1:8–9; Romans 3:23–24; Mark 2:17; Matthew 23:25–28; Psalm 51:16–17

Big Idea -A genuine follower of Jesus is not someone who plays a perfect round. A genuine follower is someone who honestly admits their sin, turns to God for mercy, and trusts Jesus rather than presenting a false spiritual scorecard.

Purpose of This Session

This discussion is designed to help the men: Understand the difference between moral failure and hypocrisy. Recognize that every person falls short of God's standard. See why the failures of Christians do not disprove Christianity. Understand the danger of self-righteousness. See that Jesus welcomes sinners who honestly seek his mercy. Consider whether they are trusting their own spiritual record or the righteousness of Jesus.

A Word to the Leader

The men in your group probably have different spiritual backgrounds. Some may not believe in Christianity. Some may be investigating Jesus for the first time. Others may be new Christians or mature believers.

Do not assume that everyone understands words such as sin, repentance, grace, mercy, or justification. Explain these terms simply when they come up.

You do not need to have all the answers. Your main responsibility is to keep the conversation centered on Jesus, Scripture, and the good news that God offers mercy to sinners.

Be especially careful not to turn this discussion into a session about the hypocrisy of other people. It is easy to talk about dishonest preachers, corrupt church leaders, or Christians who have failed publicly. Jesus' parable calls each of us to examine our own heart.

The goal is not to help the men identify all the hypocrites around them. The goal is to help each man ask:

“What does my spiritual scorecard say about me, and am I being honest with God?”

Suggested Strategy

This guide is designed for approximately 45–60 minutes.

1. Welcome and Opening Conversation —

Begin with a relaxed golf-related question:

“Have you ever played with someone who seemed to have a different way of counting strokes than everyone else?”

Allow the men to enjoy the conversation and encourage some stories, but discourage naming specific people.

Possible follow-up questions: Why does cheating bother golfers so much? Is there a difference between playing badly and cheating? Why is an honest 85 more honorable than a dishonest 79? Why are golfers sometimes tempted to improve their score?

Transition by saying: “Golfers understand that playing poorly and recording a false score are not the same thing. That distinction can help us understand the difference between spiritual failure and hypocrisy.”

2. Read the Main Passage —

Ask someone to read Luke 18:9–14 aloud.

Before reading, explain that Jesus told this parable to people who trusted in their own goodness and looked down on others.

After reading, ask: “What differences do you notice between these two men?”

Let the group identify the obvious contrasts before offering an explanation.

Understanding the Two Men

The Pharisee

The Pharisee was a respected religious man. He prayed, fasted, and gave money. Those actions were not wrong. The problem was what he trusted and what he believed about himself.

He treated his good behavior like a spiritual scorecard that proved he was better than other people. His prayer focused almost entirely on himself: What he had avoided; What he had accomplished; How he compared with others

He did not confess any sin or ask God for mercy. He believed his religious performance made him acceptable to God.

Ask: What was wrong with the Pharisee’s prayer? Was his problem that he practiced religious disciplines, or that he trusted those disciplines? Why is comparing ourselves with worse people spiritually dangerous? Where do we see this attitude today?

Help the group understand that self-righteousness means depending on our own moral or religious record to make us acceptable to God.

A golfer might say, “I am not perfect, but I am better than most of the players in my group.” Spiritually, people often say, “I have made mistakes, but I am not as bad as that person.”

But God does not grade us by comparing our score with someone else’s. His standard is his own perfect holiness.

The Tax Collector

Tax collectors were generally despised because many of them worked for Rome and became wealthy by collecting more money than people owed.

The tax collector did not present God with a list of his accomplishments. He stood at a distance, would not lift his eyes, and prayed: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

He did not minimize his sin, blame someone else, or compare himself favorably with another person. He honestly admitted his condition and appealed to God’s mercy.

Ask: What does the tax collector’s posture reveal about his heart? What did he understand about himself? What did he understand about God? Why did he ask for mercy rather than present his good deeds? What makes honest confession difficult for us?

Explain that humility is not pretending we have no value. Biblical humility means seeing ourselves honestly before God. We acknowledge both that we were created in God’s image and that we have sinned against him.

#1: Failure Is Not Necessarily Hypocrisy

A hypocrite is not simply someone who fails to live perfectly. If that were the definition, every human being would be a hypocrite.

Every Christian still struggles with sin. Christians experience temptation, make poor decisions, speak hurtful words, and sometimes commit serious sins. The presence of failure does not automatically prove that a person’s faith is false.

The important questions are: Does the person acknowledge the sin? Is there genuine sorrow over it? Does the person turn back to God? Is there a desire to change? Is the person willing to make things right where possible?

Read 1 John 1:8–9.

Point out that John includes himself when he says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” Christians do not claim to be sinless. They confess their sins and trust God’s promise of forgiveness.

Ask: What does this passage say about people who claim to have no sin? What does God promise those who confess their sins? What is the difference between confessing sin and merely regretting that we were caught? Why should God's grace make us more honest rather than less honest?

Leader's note:

Repentance does not mean a person will never struggle with that sin again. Repentance is a genuine turning of the heart toward God that begins producing a new direction in life.

#2: Hypocrisy Presents a False Scorecard

The word hypocrite originally referred to an actor wearing a mask. Spiritually, hypocrisy is deliberately presenting an outward appearance that hides what is really happening in the heart.

The problem is not merely hitting a bad shot. The problem is changing the scorecard.

Hypocrisy may include: Condemning others for sins we excuse in ourselves. Pretending to possess spiritual maturity we do not possess. Using religious language to gain approval, money, influence, or power. Hiding ongoing sin while protecting a respectable image. Refusing to repent when confronted with the truth. Performing religious actions primarily to impress people.

Ask: Why are people tempted to hide their real spiritual condition? How can religious activity become a way of managing our image? Is it possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason? Why did Jesus speak so strongly against hypocrisy? Where might we be tempted to present a better spiritual score than we actually shot?

Make the discussion personal without pressuring anyone to reveal private information.

You might say: "We do not need to confess every detail of our lives to this group. But each of us should be honest with God about where our public image and private life consistently do not match."

#3: The Failures of Christians Do Not Disprove Christianity

Some men may say: "I do not want anything to do with Christianity because Christians are hypocrites."

Acknowledge the force of this objection. Christians and churches have sometimes caused terrible harm. Dishonesty, sexual immorality, abuse, greed, and manipulation should never be minimized or defended.

You might respond: "You are right that some people who claim to represent Jesus have behaved terribly. Jesus himself strongly condemned hypocrisy. Their actions should be exposed and judged by the teachings of Christ."

Then use the golf illustration: A golfer who cheats does not disprove the Rules of Golf. His cheating can only be identified because a real standard exists. In the same way, a professing Christian's hypocrisy is judged as wrong because that behavior contradicts the teaching and character of Jesus.

Ask: Does someone's failure to follow a standard prove that the standard is false? Why should the actions of a Christian be measured against the teachings of Jesus? Have the actions of a professing Christian ever made it difficult for you to consider Jesus fairly? **What is the difference between rejecting hypocrisy and rejecting Christ?**

Leader's note: Do not become defensive. If someone has been wounded by a church or Christian leader, listen respectfully. Acknowledge the wrong without attempting to protect someone's reputation or explain away sinful behavior.

Bring the conversation back to Jesus: "The question is not whether every person who claims to be a Christian represents Jesus faithfully. The question is whether Jesus himself is trustworthy."

4: Christianity Confirms That Something Is Wrong With Us

Christianity does not teach that Christians are naturally better than other people. It teaches that every person has sinned and needs God's mercy.

Read Romans 3:23–24. Explain the key words simply: Sin means falling short of God's character and rebelling against his rightful authority. Grace is God's undeserved kindness toward sinners. Redemption means being rescued by the cost of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Justified means being declared right with God.

The tax collector was justified not because his sin was unimportant, but because he stopped defending himself and sought God's mercy.

Ask: Why is it difficult to admit that we cannot make ourselves right with God? Why do people prefer comparing themselves with others? What does this passage say that every person needs? How is grace different from pretending that sin does not matter?

Emphasize that God's grace is free to us, but it was costly to Christ. Jesus lived the perfectly righteous life we have failed to live and died to bear the judgment sinners deserve. He rose from the dead, offering forgiveness and new life to all who trust him.

#5: Jesus Came for Sinners Who Stop Pretending

Read Mark 2:17: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus was not saying that some people are spiritually healthy and do not need him. He was confronting people who believed they were already righteous.

A doctor can help someone who admits they are sick. The person who refuses to acknowledge the illness will not seek treatment. In the same way, the gospel is for people who stop pretending, acknowledge their sin, and come to Jesus.

Ask: Why must we admit our condition before we will seek mercy? What might keep someone from coming honestly to Jesus? Do you think most people see themselves as sinners who need rescue? Why or why not? What does this passage tell us about the kind of people Jesus welcomes?

Addressing Common Questions and Objection

“Aren’t all Christians hypocrites?”

Suggested response: “All Christians fail to live perfectly according to what they believe. But failure and hypocrisy are not identical. A Christian should acknowledge sin, repent, seek forgiveness, and pursue change. A hypocrite protects the appearance of righteousness while refusing to deal honestly with the heart.”

“What if someone repeatedly commits the same sin?”

Suggested response: “Repeated failure is serious, but repetition alone does not allow us to see everything happening in another person’s heart. We should look for honesty, repentance, a willingness to receive correction, and evidence of a real desire to change. At the same time, grace should never be used as an excuse to continue deliberately in sin.”

“Does forgiveness mean there are no consequences?”

Suggested response: “No. God’s forgiveness does not automatically remove every earthly consequence. A forgiven person may still need to repair damage, repay what was taken, accept discipline, rebuild trust, or step away from leadership. Genuine repentance accepts responsibility.”

“Why should I trust Christians when so many have failed?”

Suggested response: “Your faith should ultimately rest in Jesus, not in the perfection of his followers. Christians can disappoint us, sometimes very seriously. Jesus should be examined on the basis of his own life, teaching, death, and resurrection.”

“Isn’t calling someone a sinner judgmental?”

Suggested response: “Christianity does not single out a certain group as sinners. It says that every person—including every Christian—has sinned. The diagnosis is universal, and the invitation to receive mercy through Jesus is also offered freely.”

“Can a person fool everyone else and still fool God?”

Suggested response: “No. We can manage our reputation before people, but God sees the heart. That is both sobering and encouraging. It means hidden hypocrisy cannot remain hidden from him, but it also means he sees the sincere faith of a struggling believer.”

Gospel Summary

“Christianity is not about pretending that we have played a flawless round. God already knows every stroke, every penalty, and every dishonest entry.

“The Pharisee presented his spiritual scorecard and believed it made him better than other people. The tax collector came with nothing to defend. He simply asked God for mercy.

“Jesus said the tax collector went home right with God.

“The good news is not that God rewards people who successfully hide their failures. The good news is that Jesus receives sinners who stop pretending, admit the truth, and trust him.

“We do not come to Jesus because we have posted a perfect score. We come because he alone has lived the perfect life, and he offers mercy to those who trust him.”