

PARABLES: Publican and Pharisee
Luke 18:9-14

Who is the biggest sinner you know?

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

THE AUDIENCE IS INDICATED – he told THIS parable TO some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous AND Viewed others with contempt- (WHICH IS HARD TO OVERCOME)

Note: this is Jesus playing hard ball with this audience.
This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is IN YOUR FACE Jesus.

He is not holding back as he goes right at his audience.

These two go together...
Who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and
WHO DESPISED OTHERS – counted them as nothing – show contempt.
If you find one, you find the other.

What does that look like?
“Would you look at that guy, that gal...”
“I can’t believe you do or don’t ...”
“I can’t believe you let or don’t let your kids ...”
“And you call yourself a Christian “

Jesus sets up a stark contrast of opposites in the Temple – greatest degree of separation: Pharisee and Tax Collector

** As we read this it is easy to think “moral conservative religious person” vs “immoral liberal progressive secular person.”

That was the immediate application for that audience, but if we’re honest, we see how the self-righteous contempt can flow in both directions.

Having grown up as a more immoral liberal progressive secular person, I can assure you that I, and many in that camp, saw ourselves as righteous and looked on others with contempt. (i.e. modern day ‘virtue signaling’)

This problem flows both ways when Man is big and God is small. When a man-centered secular worldview is dominant, then the default mode is to compare yourself with others in order to establish some sort of moral or spiritual hierarchy or pecking order.

The comparison factor even kicks in when God is big, as we see with the Pharisees. **Our default mode is to compare ourselves with others to establish our righteousness. It is evidence of the “vain glory” that Paul warns against in Phil 2.**

But, when God and His righteousness is the standard then we're all in the same boat, and we're sinking.

THE PHARISEE AND HIS PRAYER:

The Pharisee does address God with thanks. That's a good thing, right? "In everything give thanks". So, in his mind, he is expressing thanks and gratitude to God.

He is a 'moral' person who would be put in leadership in most churches quite quickly.

And then it goes off the rails as he begins the comparison game.

This is a self-exalting prayer.

This is the default mode of the heart – comparison trap

The self-righteous audience and perhaps others who were overhearing the parable may have thought, "Wow, this guy is good leadership material."

He's MORAL – honest, loyal to his people, not like the tax collector.

He's RELIGIOUS – fasting and tithing beyond the normal standard.

They observed the normal Jewish holy day fasts and they added in Tuesdays and Thursdays. They added up all the tithes listed in the OT scripture, and they came up with 20% giving. He goes above and beyond the requirements of the Law, so in his own eyes, he is super-righteous.

He is moral and religious, and he gives credit to God!! He is the TOTAL PACKAGE.

Who could ask for more? Jesus could. !

He mentions his righteous behavior. Exaggerated? Do people do that?

Yes, in subtle ways. "Let's pray for _____ in their struggle with _____"

Strict tither but no care for his neighbor. He uses his neighbor to make himself look good.

Note what he leaves OUT of his prayer!

Any mention of HIS SIN. He is so convinced of his own righteousness by comparing himself to others that he can't see his own sin.

Remember the older son from last week – "I've always obeyed you."

They and we would do well to remember this Resolution from Jonathan Edwards...

EDWARDS RESOLUTION #8. Resolved, to act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins, or had the same weaknesses or failings as others; and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in me, and prove only an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God.

Despite opening his prayer with thanks to God, he basically leaves God out.

Pharisee – humble bragging. He prays to God, but the focus is self.

He is self-referential and self-reverential – I, I, I, I

He's the Toby Keith of Pharisees

"I wanna talk about me

Wanna talk about I

Wanna talk about number one

Oh my, me my

What I think, what I like, what I know, what I want, what I see."

He is unaware of the spiritual disaster that may soon burst out upon him because he is so self-focused. He

feels so comfortable with his own spiritual resume that he ignores the spiritual danger before him.

Given his pride and self-righteousness, it is only normal that he would look on others with contempt.

TAX COLLECTOR'S PRAYER

Note the contrast with the first prayer:

Here, the man expresses humility and a true God focus.

This is not a false humility designed to impress or manipulate God.

The Tax Collector sees himself as not worthy.

“The sinner” not ‘a’ sinner. **He sees himself in God’s sight and doesn’t compare himself to ANYONE.**

He is “the” sinner. Only his sin matters.

He sees his condition as one who needs mercy. He’s not asking for justice, but mercy from God. This is a posture of humility. He prays out of desperation.

He is not pleading mitigating circumstances or his overall good record and good name. He’s not negotiating with God. He is simply asking for mercy because He believes God to be merciful.

His act of beating his breast would indicate that he knows that his problem is inside himself – His heart.

The word ‘merciful’ is from the root word for ‘propitiate’ – let your justice be satisfied and your anger turned away.

THIS IS NOT the typical word we see in the NT for ‘mercy’.

He is standing near the altar of the Temple where the atoning sacrifice would be offered on behalf of sin.

This passage does not mention the Cross per se, but the context of the prayer offered in the Temple points to God who provides the sacrifice for the propitiation of our sin.

He’s not just asking for ‘mercy’ in general. He is admitting that he needs propitiation to cover his sin. He’s not asking God to just overlook it, but to make the necessary provision to cover it.

The Pharisee doesn’t see any need to be covered by mercy at all. He is covered by his own resume, or so he thinks.

WHO LEAVES JUSTIFIED? The one who knows that He needs a sacrifice outside of himself.

Martin Luther, the great 16th century reformer made much of the fact that in salvation we are given a foreign or ALIEN righteousness. It is not our own; it is the righteousness of Christ that is credited to us when we trust Him by faith.

Some might say that the Tax Collector is a hypocrite....”How many people begged him for mercy and he never showed any? Now, he dares to come and ask God for mercy.”

Perhaps it is awareness of his own failure to be merciful that motivates him to seek mercy because he knows what he deserves before a Just God. **WE DON’T KNOW** the motivations and promptings of his heart. We only know that at this time he is crying for mercy and Jesus describes him as leaving the temple ‘justified.’

WHO IS THE BIGGEST SINNER YOU KNOW?

You are the worst sinner you know.

YOU ARE THE ONLY one who knows the true depth of Your own sin, if you are honest. The same is true for me.

EX: I believe it was Mother Teresa who said, “When people criticize me, I just remind myself that if they really knew my heart, they could say much worse things about me.”

The Stunning Verdict from Jesus

v. 14 – Jesus shocks the crowd, - The good guy is bad and the ‘bad’ guy is good.

This is a thorn in the side of the Pharisee.
Both come in to pray and only one leaves justified.

The parable raises questions that are not part of the story.

Is Jesus condoning tax collection of this fashion? Does he need to change jobs? Etc
The narrative doesn’t go there. It’s not the point.

“When sinners plea for mercy, I grant it” – that is the core of the story from Jesus.

AN INTERESTING PERSPECTIVE...

Donald Barnhouse -

What would things look like if Satan really took control of a city? Over a half century ago, Presbyterian minister Donald Grey Barnhouse [of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA] offered his own scenario in his weekly sermon that was also broadcast nationwide on CBS radio.

Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philadelphia all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am,” and the churches would be full every Sunday...where Christ is not preached.

Barnhouse does not say that to denounce morality and decency. He makes the point that morality without Christ is of no spiritual benefit. Our best efforts are as filthy rags and cannot give us a right standing with God. Above all, we need the redeeming sacrifice of Christ to know forgiveness and a right relationship with God. Our grace fueled obedience flows out of faith that works through love. Such obedience is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus, not the gospel of me.

Satan wants to confuse our minds and keep us in a transactional relationship with God – “try harder to do better so that you can make a claim on God’s kindness. Satan is not opposed to the moralism we see in our culture today, i.e. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

<https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/04/27/counterfeit-christianity-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-most-popular-worldview-in-u-s-culture/>

Soul Searching 2005 Christian Smith; Melinda Denton

Those components included:

Belief in a God who remains distant from people’s lives

People are supposed to be good to each other (i.e., moral)

The universal purpose of life is being happy and feeling good about oneself

There are no absolute moral truths

God allows “good people” into Heaven

God places very limited demands on people

We don’t need moralistic therapy to tell us that we’re good people.

We need Gospel clarity so that we too cry out, “God have mercy on me the sinner.”

That sort of honesty about ourselves and about the grace and mercy of God is very therapeutic for our souls.

DON'T BOAST IN NOT BEING A PHARISEE.

You can be a pharisee about Pharisees; a ‘grace’ Pharisee.

Be careful about being a Pharisee about Pharisees

“ O God, I thank you that I’m not like those Pharisees. I’m not hung up about praying and reading the Bible. I thank you that I understand grace more than those other folks who are hung up on holiness. I know that you like to forgive sinners and I like to sin, so that’s a win/win. I try really hard not to be holier than thou so I’ll go along with stuff I know is wrong so that my friends will think I’m cool. I’m really strict about not being legalistic. I know that I’m not perfect, but I’m so much more gracious than those Pharisees over there.”

The “Pharisee operating system” is hard wired in the human heart, so we must beware of how and when that virus is popping up in our lives.

THINK ABOUT THAT.

AMEN.

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