



The Publican in the Temple

Being Justified versus Self-Righteousness

Luke 18:9-14

9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men-- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

12 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

13 "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

14 "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

To whom did Jesus speak this parable?

It is important to note to whom Jesus spoke his parable: to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.

What characterizes those who trust in themselves?

They despise others. This is a basic principle that is discussed in various places in the Bible such as Romans 1: Because they have a flawed relationship with God, they have a flawed relationship with other people.

- A person can not sustain good relationships horizontally if they don't have the prerequisite healthy vertical relationship.
- Flawed relationships with other people are proof that a person has a flawed relationship with God.

How do people who are outwardly religious but have a flawed relationship with God show that they really despise others despite what they profess?

By pointing out the faults in others – they think they are spiritual because they “discern” the faults in others. But actually the most spiritual are those who so see their sinful condition before God they don't concern themselves with pointing out the faults of others.

Matt 7:3-5 – “And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye.”

Who were the Pharisees?

Devout religious Jews who professed to live by God's Law. However, they were legalistic in that they tried to hold to the letter of the Law but not the spirit. In fact they came up with their own “interpretations” of the Law which became the rules the wanted people to live by. For example, keeping the Sabbath holy became described by a myriad of rules such as how much weight a person could carry how far.

What did the Pharisee pray?

He thanked God that he did not have the faults he saw in other men. He also reminded God about his work of fasting and tithing.

What was wrong with this prayer?

It was paying “lip-service” to God. He was not really crediting God for the way he was, he was reminding God of his good works. His prayer was all about what he did, not what God did or is doing.

Why did Jesus say the Pharisee prayed with himself?

While the man considered himself to be righteous, he was not. God does not hear the prayers of the unrighteous.

Prov 15:29 - The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

Isa 59:2 - But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.

What did the Pharisee think of himself?

He thought he was more righteous than most others, certainly the tax collector who was hated by the Jews because they collaborated with the occupying Roman government.

What did the Pharisee think of the tax collector?

He despised him because of his profession, he lumped him in with the unjust, extortioners and other immoral people.

What did God think of the Pharisee?

The man was unrighteous because he trusted in his works to justify him before God.

Why wouldn't God look favorably on this Pharisee? After all, he did many religious things: he fasted and was praying in God's temple, he obeyed God's Law, and he gave a tenth of his income for God's work.

God knows why we do what we do.

- Our motivation for why we do what we do is more important than what we do.
 - The Pharisee was not engaged in religious pursuits because he loved God and wanted to see Him glorified.
 - He engaged in religious activities to prove to men and God he was righteous.
 - The Pharisee thought he could earn salvation, that God owed him salvation because of who he was and what he did.
 - This is the height of arrogance, trying to manipulate God.

Doesn't any religious activity serve to justify us before God?

- No. Religious activity may be a result of being saved and having a relationship with the Savior but it is far more common for religion to be man's way to justify himself before God.
- Jesus had this to say about religious people:
Matt 7:21-23 - "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

If Jesus rejected people who called Him Lord and did many great works in His name, how can anyone be saved?

- The key is where Jesus said, "*I never knew you.*" Since Jesus is God Almighty, He knows us, He knows more about us than we know ourselves. When the Bible says, "*I never knew you,*" this means, "never had a relationship with you."
- Jesus didn't come to lead us into a new religion, He came to make a way for us to have a relationship with Him.
 - Jesus has already done everything necessary for us to have a relationship with Him by paying the price for our sins.
 - We may be forgiven and made righteous if we respond by accepting His invitation and receive Him into our life.
- Jesus said: "*many are called, but few chosen*" (Matt 20:16).

- All who have heard about Jesus are called those who are chosen are those who respond by letting Him into their life and enter into a relationship with Him.

How do you know if you have a relationship with Jesus?

- For any relationship to work, you must have two-way communication. We speak to Him in prayer and He speaks to us through His Word and circumstances that are beyond coincidence.
Rom 8:16 - The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God
- Those who have a good healthy relationship with their Creator will have good relationships with others as well.

I Jn 3:14 - We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

Do all saved people go to church?

There are a lot of unsaved people who go to church, who go through the religious motions like the Pharisees did but don't be deceived, there are no saved people in a healthy relationship with the Lord who are not active in church.

- Not everyone in church are saved, but everyone who are saved are in church.

Now let's look at the publican...

Conviction of Personal Guilt

What did the tax collector think of himself?

- The tax collector knew he was a sinner in God's eyes.
- The tax collector was grounded in reality. Since he saw himself as God did, he saw himself as he really was.

Why did the tax collector know he was a sinner? Was it because tax collecting was a sin?

No. The tax collecting business provided many opportunities to sin but God had revealed to him the motivations of his heart. The tax collector knew that it was his nature to sin... "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom 3:23)

How did the tax collector come to have God's perspective about His sin?

The Holy Spirit revealed it to him...

John 16:7-8 – “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment”

Why didn't the Holy Spirit reveal this truth to the Pharisee?

He did, the Pharisee just rejected it seeking to follow the “gospel” of self-righteousness instead.

Grief on Account of Sin

How did the tax collector feel about his sin condition?

The fact that he beat his breast demonstrated that the tax collector was grieved by his sin.

Why do you think the tax collector was grieved by his sin?

For the same three reasons anyone should be grieved by their sin:

1. He recognized the deep offence that sin is to God. All sin at its root is rebellion against God.
2. He realized that all sin has consequences and that he was inflicting injury upon himself.
3. He also knew that his sin was a hurtful influence on others. The consequences of sin almost always spreads beyond the sinner to affect others.

Humility and Shame before God

Why does the Scripture say the tax collector stood afar off?

- The tax collector stood afar off because he was ashamed before God.
- A good solid sense of shame about our sin is something our society has lost. This problem characterized the kingdom of Judah before the Lord raised up Babylon to punish them for their sin:
Jeremiah 6:15 - Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down," says the LORD.

Why didn't the tax collector so much as raise his eyes to heaven when he prayed?

The tax collector didn't raise his eyes to heaven when he prayed out of humility. He knew his place before God so he approached Him in a humble spirit.

An Earnest Prayer to God

What was the objective of the tax collector's prayer? For what did he pray?

The tax collector prayed for mercy.

Why didn't the tax collector pray for justice?

The tax collector knew that from justice he could expect nothing but punishment... “*For the wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23).

What kind of character did the tax collector demonstrate by making a simple and brief prayer?

The simple and brief prayer of the tax collector showed that he was earnest and sincere in his request. There was no excess baggage, he cut to the chase knowing that beating around the bush was a waste of time with God.

How did the tax collector demonstrate a desire to please God?

The fact that the tax collector offered his prayer in the way God had dictated for this time: at the temple during the time of prayer.

A Happy Result

What was the result of the publican correctly recognizing his sin condition and appealing to God for mercy?

God justified him which means God had mercy on him imputed righteous to him. Because the tax collector aligned his perspective with God agreeing with Him that he was a sinner who needed God's mercy for salvation, God saved him.

What did the Pharisee's prayer do for him?

Nothing. You would think that putting words to his pride would help him to recognize it for what it was but those who do not have a personal relationship with the Lord can not even discern the truth...

1 Cor 2:14 - But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The tax collector came to the temple lowly and went home exalted, the Pharisee came proudly and went away without having found that for which he came in the first place.

Jesus said “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,” how was the Pharisee humbled?

If not in this life, then at the Great White Throne judgment...

Phil 2:10-11 - at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If the Pharisee was honest with himself, he would know in his heart of hearts that all of his works did not justify him before God.

- God has written enough of the truth in the hearts of all of us so that we may recognize the truth when we see it...

Rom 2:14-15 - for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)

What is the danger with allowing yourself to continue in prideful self-righteousness?

The danger in persisting in your pride is that you can sear your conscience (1 Timothy 4:2). If you sear your conscience long enough, eventually you will pass the point of no-return where your heart become hardened to things of God...

Prov 29:1 - He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

What is the basic principle that this story about the Pharisee and tax collector teaches?

This story about the Pharisee and tax collector teach a basic principle that is in many other places in Scripture...

Those who humble themselves before their Creator by obeying Him will be exalted...

Isaiah 57:15 - For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Jesus put it this way: *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matthew 5:5).

Don't think that inheriting the earth is just limited to this world. God is going to create a new, eternal earth where those who are saved will spend eternity. This new earth will be heaven because God will make his home with His redeemed.

Where have you seen self-righteousness in your own life?

When I reflect on my life before the Lord saved me, I see a lot of similarities between myself and the Pharisee in this story. I wasn't a religious person but I assumed that if I was going to heaven, it would be on the basis of my being better than most people in terms of righteousness. In my agnostic view, if God existed, He surely graded on a curve. I didn't give this a lot of thought however because I didn't know where God would draw the line, I didn't know how good I needed to be. Deep down I knew I didn't make the grade.

But when God opened my eyes to Jesus and what He did on the cross, and why I needed Him in my life, it was the most wonderful feeling in the world. No longer did I have to worry about being good enough to earn eternal life. It isn't something anyone can earn. It is a free gift that only needs to be received. It is amazing how many people refuse to receive eternal life just because they refuse to yield to the One who created them.