

Luke 18:10-14

In the book of Luke, Jesus shares a powerful parable that challenges us to do a little healthy soul searching. It depicts two men visiting the temple praying to the same God, but something between the two of them is very different.

Luke 18:10-14 Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. (11) The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. (12) I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. (13) And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon 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 every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

On the surface, the lesson teaches that humility is better than pride. But as we look a little deeper, we find that there's more in this parable than what we commonly see with just a brief glance.

First this is A Shocking Parable. In Jesus' day the Pharisees were considered among the most pious and religious of all the believers in God. On the other hand, the publicans were branded as unfaithful and unjust extortionists. They were seen as the mafia of their day. You can see why Jesus' conclusion of this parable literally stunned His Jewish audience. It was an outrageous to suggest that a publican would be more justified (or saved) while a Pharisee would be unforgiving and lost. Jesus had turned their ranking system upside down.

Secondly we see Some Common Ground. These men had a few things in common. **First**, they **both believed** in God. If you want to be in the saved group, that's a good start! Belief is essential to salvation, but it is not the only criteria for salvation. ***"Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble"*** (James 2:19). Since the devils believe there is a God, there must be something more to being saved.

Both men also **went to the temple to worship**. We might think of them as "church goers." This too is important if you want to be in the saved group. It's been said, *"If you don't have enough faith to get you to church once a week, it's not likely you will have enough faith to get you to heaven for eternity."* Sometimes people excuse not going to worship by claiming there are hypocrites there. Others complain that worship is boring. But the purpose of worship is NOT to be entertained—but to worship God, and for your worship to be fulfilling, it has to be from the inside and not the external.

A **third thing** these men had in common was that **they both prayed**. Jesus says in Luke 18:1 that men ***"ought always to pray,"*** and Paul writes that we should ***"pray without ceasing"*** (1 Thessalonians 5:17). So we see both men (1) believed in God (2) worship God (3) and prayed to God. Now let's consider some of their differences.

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The Pharisees proudly displayed their godliness. They were a hyper-conservative element of believers who were zealous about the scriptures and their tradition. When the Jews were captive in Babylon, the prophets told them they were overcome because of their unfaithfulness to God. In response, the sect of Pharisees was formed so that Israel would no longer allow themselves to be influenced by the surrounding pagan nations, particular in the details of their religion. So this was generally a good group of people who were very zealous in their belief of keeping themselves undefiled by their environment.

Unfortunately, many and perhaps most of the Pharisees let their zeal for obedience eclipse their love for their fellow man. They viewed their traditions equally binding if not surpassed scripture. Jesus called them on the carpet several times for their self-righteous wickedness. ***Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness (Matt 23:27).*** In this parable, the Pharisee is a hypocritical man.

A publican, on the other hand, was the tax collector—though they were quite different from tax collectors today. When the Romans conquered a province, they didn't speak the language and didn't know the culture, but wanted the tax income. So instead of collecting taxes themselves, they contracted local people to be tax collectors. They were required to collect a certain amount of tax from their district and anything over and above that amount they kept for themselves. Many of them would exploit their position to extort vast sums to fill their own pockets. Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector in Jericho.

The publicans were detested by the Jews, who considered them traitors for taking money from God's people and giving it to the pagans. Many publicans lived a lifestyle of immorality and debauchery and were viewed as the worst breed of sinners.

So in this parable about two people going to the temple to pray to God, the people naturally looked upon the Pharisees as the ones who were the closest to God and the publicans as the most hopeless, God-forsaken untouchables. Yet Jesus favored the publican - "Why?"

An important distinction between the two men was in the way they prayed. ***"The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself" (Luke 18:11).*** He stood up, by himself, and then thanked God that he was not like the publican. Most likely, his head was up and his arms were stretched out. He was comparing his spirituality against another man. Materially, the publican may have been wealthier and had more material goods than the Pharisee; but the Pharisee was looking at the man's character and concluded that he was much better.

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But the publican's prayer was entirely different. ***"The publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).*** The publican in humility stood in the back, not even daring to lift up his eyes.

At this point, the Pharisee began to chronicle all his good works. ***"I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (verse 12).*** He wanted people to know what he was doing and how much he was giving for the Lord. His prayer was actually self-exaltation. Jesus once said (Matt. 6:2) if you do things to be seen of men, then you have received your reward. This parable illustrates that.

This parable is important for us today because there is a danger of having Pharisees character. One of the problems with this Pharisee was that he expressed no need of help. He didn't acknowledge any problems or faults. All he saw were virtues. Yet his self-righteousness was worthless.

Here, Jesus is not holding up the righteousness of the Pharisees as a standard. Instead, He tells us we must rise above their standard to enter the kingdom of heaven. ***"Matthew 5:20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*** Their righteousness was before men. True righteousness must be before God.

How Do I Pray? Matt 6:5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. The idea of the parable is not that standing while praying is bad, but rather why you are standing. Jesus is not talking about your posture in prayer. Jesus is talking about making a spectacle and drawing attention to yourself, either through your actions or by your words.

Notice the prayer of the Pharisee, ***"Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men."*** Do we sometimes do that? There is a danger of subconsciously questioning another person's behavior and thinking I am thankful that I'm not like that.

The Pharisee in our parable measured himself with others rather than with God. He lacked a humble, contrite spirit. He felt no need for God and made no request in his prayer. His thanks were not thanking God for being God. His thanks were for himself. Five times in his prayer he said, "I." It is an entirely self-centered speech telling God how fortunate He was for having a person like himself

Typically, even the self-centered prayer, ask for something. ***"God, do this for me. Lord, give me that."*** It's okay to pray about our needs. Jesus even says to ask God for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11). But many times we'll throw in requests for things we don't need. Remarkably, the Pharisee made no request at all. Apparently he was so self-righteous that he believed he didn't need anything and perhaps it

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was this one thing that most disqualified him! So we see **the** publican and the Pharisee both believed in God, but it turns out one was worshipping himself while the other pleaded for mercy from God.

In Luke 18:12, the Pharisee reminded the Lord about his good works, one of which was **fasting twice a week**. It was only required by the Jews to fast once a year during the Passover. There's nothing wrong with fasting. There's nothing wrong with praying or giving either. The problem is when you do these things for the wrong reason—that's the difference between the publican and the Pharisee. It has to do with motives. Jesus taught, *Mathew 6:16 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.* The Pharisee lifted himself up in the sight of men which gave him a sense of pride and worth, yet he didn't find that in God's eyes. As a standard he looked around and compared himself to other men. We can always find somebody that we think is worse off spiritually than we are.

The publican was probably not the worst sinner in the immediate area and could have compared himself to others too, but he didn't compare himself to men. He didn't pray with a horizontal perspective; rather, he humbled himself to God and begged for mercy because he saw that the gap was huge between his life and God expected. The Pharisee, in the presence of the publican, said, *"I'm not that bad."* There is a danger of us doing the same thing. But we should compare ourselves to Jesus, lifting Him up as our example and standard. This is what the publican did when in humility he said *God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13)*. That's the only way we can be truly lifted up. *"Humble yourself before the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:10 NKJV)*. To the church in Laodicea Jesus said, *Revelation 3:17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:*

This parable of the Pharisee and publican is prevalent for us today because it shows that we must be careful and work on our attitude toward others and toward God. Arrogance and an unwillingness to admit we need salvation will be a chronic problem. On the other hand, it also shows that those who come to God recognizing their spiritual poverty will be open to and embrace the gospel message.

Invitation