

We learn from the dream and request made by Solomon in 1 Kings 3 that God can be impressed. For the next few minutes we are going to be looking at Luke 18:9-14 as we consider what impresses God. Here we find Jesus telling a parable of two men with two totally different attitudes and results. We read about one man who tried to talk his way into the kingdom of God but failed and another man who tried to talk his way out of the kingdom of God, but he made it. There was one who lived a respectable life and thought God would be impressed with him, but He wasn't. Then there was a man who lived a despicable life and he thought there was no way that God would be pleased with him, but He was.

We all can probably find ourselves somewhere in this parable because we are all concerned about pleasing God. In this parable, Jesus sets the record straight as He tells us what really impresses God and what doesn't. So we want to look at three basic things: foolishness, failure and fulfillment.

First I want you to notice the **Pharisee who fooled himself**. Look beginning in *10} 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.* Now the initial response is to just unload on the Pharisee. We don't have a lot of respect for him because of his arrogant attitude. But let's not overlook some good qualities about this man's life. He tells us in vs. 11 that he is not an extortioner. The word "extortioner" comes from a term that means to reach out and to snatch away or to grab. It's like a little child who pulls away his toy from another child. It's the idea of stealing so the man was in essence saying, "*Lord, I'm not a crook.*"

Then he says, "I'm not unjust." This was a general expression for mistreating other people, so what he is saying is that I have treated people fairly. Now this could not always be said of the publicans. The publicans were known for treating people unjustly but the Pharisee said I'm not like that. There are really not a lot of skeletons in my closet.

He goes on to say that I have been faithful to my wife. I am not an adulterer. I'm a good family man.

There are some bad things that this man did not do and then there are some good things that he did do. Notice in v. 12 he said, "*I fast twice a week.*" Now fasting under the old law was only required one day out of the year and that was on the Day of Atonement. But this Pharisee fasted twice every week, 103 times more than the law required. He goes on to say that he gave tithes of all that he possessed. Here again he did more that was required. The Jewish people were required to give a tenth of all that they earned but the language here implies that he not only did he give out of what he earned but also out of what he bought. He gave of all that he had which would include what he earned as well as what he had bought, so he was a double

giver. Now there is certainly nothing wrong with doing more than the minimum requirement and we can commend him for that. So we can see there were some good things about this man's life.

But there was also a problem. This Pharisee trusted in himself. That's why Jesus told the parable. *(Luke 18:9 KJV) And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.* He was a man who thought that in and of himself he could be so good and so righteous and so holy that he literally earned God's favor and deserved the blessings that God showered on him. He felt that God was somehow indebted to him because of the life that he lived - *"God you're sure lucky to have a person life me serving you."* NOW THIS IS A REAL DANGER TODAY of faithful, working Christians. It's easy to see ourselves as deserving God's blessings. After all I'm benevolent to the needed, I seek out and study with the lost, I teach Bible class, I'm an elder or a deacon. God, you are lucky to have me. Now if you feel that way, then you are making a foolish mistake. There is no way we can be good enough to earn God's favor or to deserve His blessings. *(Isa 64:6 KJV) But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.* The word there for "filthy rags" was a word that described the soiled and diseased garment of a leper. Then we have one chapter earlier in Luke the instruction *(Luke 17:10 KJV) So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.* There is no way we can ever earn God's blessings.

So we have this Pharisee fooling himself with an "I" problem. Five different times in verses 11 & 12 he uses the personal pronoun "I." I do this, I don't do that, etc. You see, this man had a twofold problem, inflation and deflation. He had an inflated view of who he was and a deflated view of what God was. *C. S. Lewis said a long time ago that when a person looks down on other people, it is impossible for him to see what is above him, and he's right. That's what "pride" does to a person's life. You look down on others and you begin to trust in your own goodness, then before long you feel pretty self sufficient and tend to forget about God. You put the focus in the wrong place.*

Now the Pharisee fooled himself in two basic respects. **First he fooled himself about himself.** He prayed and he thanked God saying, *I thank thee, that I am not as other men are.* But he was as other men. Fact of the matter, we are all in the same boat together. Remember *(Rom 3:23 KJV) For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.* Then John reminds us in *(1 John 1:8 KJV) If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* It doesn't matter how good you are or how well you live according to the standard of God's word, you still fall far short of God's absolute standard of perfection. We all violate God's will which puts us all in the same category of standing in the need of the grace and mercy of God.

In America we pride ourselves as being a people who have the opportunity to work your way up through the ranks and make something out of yourself. But spiritually speaking, you don't pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. You need the mercy, the grace and the forgiveness of God. So this man fooled himself about himself.

Secondly, he fooled himself about his prayer. The passage says *{11} The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.* Now in the original language this means he prayed to himself. Now when you come to God in prayer with a heart full of pride, then all you are doing is talking to yourself. *It like this fellow who was talking to his friend one day and said, "you know my wife has a problem. She goes around all the time talking to herself excessively." The friend asked if she realized what she was doing. The fellow said, "No. She thinks I'm listening to her."* That was the problem with the Pharisee, he thought God was listening to his prayer, but He wasn't. He was just praying to himself. You know the only person that God sends away empty is the person who is "full of himself." Now it doesn't matter what your prayer contains and how eloquent you articulate the words, if that prayer is offered out of a heart filled with pride, basically all you are doing is talking to yourself. So here is a man who fooled himself about himself and about his prayer. All the good qualities in his life were nullified by his prideful attitude.

Now there is another person in this parable referred to as a **PUBLICAN**. We see a stark contrast between this publican and the Pharisee. Now Jesus tells us that this publican stood afar off and would not so much as to lift up his eyes toward heaven. Instead he smote his breast and said *God be merciful to me a sinner.* This contrast between these two fellows can be seen both outwardly and inwardly. Now the people would appreciate the outwardly contrast that Jesus paints because they had a tremendous amount of respect for the Pharisee. They were considered the most righteous people in the nation. As great as their respect was for the Pharisee; there was as much disgust for the publicans. In the first century, a publican was a tax collector who was employed by the Roman government and at this time, Israel was an occupied territory of Rome. Now whenever Rome ruled an area, they taxed the people very heavily. They would go into an area and estimate the amount they wanted to collect in taxes and then they would hire local people to do the actual collection. This was a very lucrative occupation because they collected the amount Rome wanted and handed it over to the authorities. Any excess to that amount they kept. So they would skim off the top and because of that they were generally regarded as dishonest. Publicans were considered the scum of society. In fact, I've been told they were held in such low esteem, no publican could hold public office nor could they testify in a court because his word was considered untrustworthy.

So here we see such a fellow who is likely a reprobate, ungodly and just as far to that extreme as the Pharisee was to his

extreme. But to those listening, Jesus gives the story a strange twist because it was this publican who impressed God. Jesus concludes the story by saying this publican was the one who *went down to his house justified rather than the other*. So the question is what was it about this reprehensible life that impressed God so much when the respectable life of this Pharisee didn't impress Him at all. Let us suggest two things in the life of the publican which impressed God.

First, there was his humility. He was as humble as the Pharisee had been proud. His humility could be seen in a number of areas. For instance, his humility could be seen in his feet. *13} And the publican, standing afar off.* Although not specifically stated, you get the idea that when the Pharisee prayed, he took center stage. The impression you get is that he wanted to be where everybody could see and hear him. On the other hand, this publican stood afar off because he felt unworthy. So he stood in the background perhaps in the shadows.

You could see his humility in his eyes. He *would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven*. He was probably too ashamed to look up and felt unworthy to look toward the face of God. For the same reason we today bow when we pray. It is a sign of humility.

You can see the humility in the publican's hands as he smote his breast. That was a sign of remorse. In a sense, it was an indication of repentance. So in essence this man smote his breast saying, *"I know that I am unworthy. I have done wrong and I am sorry. It grieves me deeply."*

Then you can hear his humility in his voice as he said *God be merciful to me a sinner*. He was appealing for the mercy of God. The highway to heaven is paved with humility.

Now if you look at these two on the outside, the multitudes would have chosen that Pharisee to be the one closest to God. But on the inside, we see that it was the publican who was closer to God and in the final analysis, it is really only God's opinion that matters at all. God is not only concerned about what takes place on the outside of our lives but He is equally concerned about what goes on in the inside of our lives. In short, it is HUMILITY that impresses God and God has a way of exalting the humble and humbling the exalted.

Secondly, God was not only impressed because of the publican's humility, He was **impressed because of his HONESTY**. He stood there and he prayed *God be merciful to me a sinner*. The original language reads, *"God be merciful to me THE sinner."* He didn't try to excuse or conceal or justify his sin, he simply admitted his sin and he threw himself on the mercy of God. The Greek word for "merciful" goes back to a Hebrew word "kapor"- atonement, which means "to cover". The scripture teaches on a number of occasions that the only way that the God will be able to cover our sins with the blood of Christ is if we are willing

to uncover them by confessing them openly and honestly. (*Prov 28:13 KJV*) *He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.*

{1 John 1:8} If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. {9} If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The only thing worse than being a sinner is to be a sinner and not be willing to admit it because when you refuse to admit it, then you close the door on God's forgiveness. So we have this publican, a person who faults himself and he comes into the presence of God and in spite of this man's past, God is impressed because he was a man of humility and a man of honesty. Now that's what it takes to do business with God.

Thirdly, not only was there a Pharisee who fooled himself and a publican who failed, **there is a principle that fulfills itself.** Jesus taught this parable to get across a great spiritual truth. He states it for us there in (*Luke 18:14 KJV*) *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.* As stated earlier, those people were probably amazed at the twist Jesus gives to this story because they would have chosen exactly the opposite. They would have cited the Pharisee as the one who had God's approval. But Jesus emphasized that God exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. The great man is not the person who is served but rather the person who serves.

Growing out of this principle let me make briefly three applications.

No. 1. It is not how you see yourself that really matters but rather how God sees you. This Pharisee saw himself as something special but he was foolish in his self appraisal.

No. 2. When you view God as you should, then you will see yourself as you really are. This publican had a proper view of who God was and saw himself as he really was.

No. 3. We all stand in need of God's mercy. You cannot earn nor do you deserve mercy, but rather mercy is what God gives you when you admit that you need it.

Invitation