

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Key Themes: Justification, Self-Righteousness / Humility

[Core Gospel Concepts: Sin, Repentance, Use of the Law, Justification]

THE STORY:

One day Jesus told a parable to some people who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. This is what Jesus said:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, saying, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his chest and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

And Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Optional Memory Verse: Hebrews 10:19-22: *"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience..."*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

Are there any people in your life who you tend to look down upon? If so, what kind of person or people do you look down on? Why?

Teacher's Transition Statement

In today's story Jesus has something to say to us when we are feeling proud or looking down on others. Let's look at the story he teaches and discuss what we learn about the story's characters.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory:
 - Note all the words and actions of the Pharisee.
 - Note all the words and actions of the tax collector.

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything to the group)

- **Audience:** Who was Jesus telling the parable to? Why?
- **Same:** How were the Tax Collector and Pharisee alike?
- **Different:** How were they different in their behavior?
- **Motivation to Pray:** What was each man's source of hope or confidence?
- **Attitude in Approaching God:**
- **Final Results:** What happened with each man?

- **Justified before God:** What does this mean?
- **View of the Law:** How well did the law serve each?
- **Spiritual Disciplines:** What laws do we make for ourselves about disciplines like prayer, Bible study, fellowship, tithing, etc.? What should be our true goal in such disciplines?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? How am I like the Pharisee in my approach to God? How can I repent?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

Discussion Questions (with some possible responses)

- **What did these men have in common? What did each of these men go to the temple to do?**
- **Let's look at some of their differences. Where and how did each one position himself to pray?**
 - *The Pharisee stood proudly, spoke loudly, had no shame, only felt confidence in himself.*
 - *The tax collector stood far off to the side, almost hiding. He was full of shame and sorrow. Beat his chest with his head down.*
- **Why did each of these men go to the temple to pray?**
 - *Pharisee: to exalt himself, to show off in front of others, to boast in front of the Lord, to recount for all every act of commitment.*
 - *Tax collector: to plead for God's mercy, he was broken by his own sin. Knew he deserved punishment and condemnation, was burdened by it.*
- **What was each man depending on?**
 - *Pharisee: himself, his own good deeds, his own rule keeping, his own righteousness.*
 - *Tax collector: God alone, God's mercy on sinners.*
- **How was it possible for the Pharisee to feel so confident in himself?**
 - *He looked only at his surface activities, not at his heart attitudes.*
 - *Compared himself to others in these surface activities. Felt that God owed him since he performed better than other people.*
- **What was the difference in how each man approached God?**
 - *Pharisee: not in need, just came to acknowledge his own righteousness. He said he was thankful, but really was just proud. Felt like God owed him a good position and that he deserved for God and man to listen to him. He could not see the sin of his heart because of his pride in how well he performed in his religious activities.*
 - *Tax collector: desperately needy, ruined by his sin, knew it and admitted it, hopeless in himself, grateful for a God that would just listen to him, even though he didn't deserve it.*
- **What was the final result for each man?**
 - *The tax collector went home justified before God.*
 - *But the Pharisee remained lost in his sin.*
- **What did it mean for the tax collector to be "justified" before God?**
 - *He was accepted by or approved of by God. He was made right in God's eyes.*
- **So, did all the good things that the Pharisee do end up being good for him or harmful for him? Why?**

- o *They were ultimately harmful because Satan used them to deceive him into thinking he was righteous and in need of no help. He did not see his need for a Savior.*
- o *In the end he did not really trust God and was not justified. Therefore he was in danger of God's judgment.*
- **How well did God's law serve or help each man?**
 - o **How did it serve the tax collector? How did it help him?**
 - *It showed him that God was holy, that he was a terrible sinner, and it led him to cry out to God for mercy.*
 - o **How did it serve the Pharisee? How did it help him?**
 - *Not very well. The law is good, but the Pharisees set up external obedience to the law as the key to pleasing God and standing before him. They even added more rules and regulations that they could obey in order to increase their display of commitment before others. Thus, they cheated themselves regarding the reality of their inner heart sins.*
 - *Their misuse of the law led them to depend on themselves and not on God. In the end it led to destruction for those who never repented.*
- **Who was Jesus telling this parable to?**
 - o *Those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.*
- **Who might those people be these days? In whom might we see the Pharisee or the tax collector today, in our churches and world?**
 - o *Highly committed people in the church - pastors, leaders, those who tithe, those who attend every event, some who pray or sing loudly and passionately.*
 - o *People who do good things, but begin to be proud of themselves for these things. They do good things more for their own reputation than out of humble gratitude to God or out of love for others.*
- **What do you think this parable can teach us in regard to using the various disciplines of our faith, such as having our personal quiet times?**
 - o *Simple external activity, or obeying a law to pray and read every day, can just lead to pride rather than truly meeting with our Father.*
 - o *God wants us to come to him in need, admitting our own unworthiness and inability to save ourselves or fix our own lives or the problems of the world. We are to believe that he is a God who loves us and receives us always. We are to come in gratitude for all he has done for us in Christ.*
- **How could having daily times of prayer and Bible reading ever turn into a bad or dangerous thing? Is this possible? Does that mean we should stop doing it?**
 - o *These practices can become dangerous when doing them makes us proud and makes us look down on others, as if these practices earned our salvation before God.*
 - o *We should not stop doing these things. Instead we should continue in them but repent regularly of the wrong attitudes we've had and trust Jesus alone for our righteousness. We should ask the Spirit to grow in us a humble, thankful, and repentant heart.*
- **What really makes true fellowship with God possible?**

- o *The gospel of grace through Christ. We need to respond to the gospel in faith, to know that God loves you and wants you to be with him. This must always be at the heart of our devotional time, church activities, and areas of service.*
- **What should be the ultimate goal of prayer and Bible study? What should you avoid? Why?**
 - o *The final goal is to meet with your merciful Father.*
 - o *Should be aware of your own tendency to build a sense of your self-righteousness or to be overwhelmed with guilt when you fail. Better to rejoice in having a Father who loves you and a Savior who died for you.*
- **Read Hebrews 10:19-23. How can confidence in God's grace and forgiveness for your sins help you in your devotional life? How can knowing that you are adopted as God's child who is always welcome into his direct presence encourage your devotional life?**

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **How do we resemble the Pharisee at times in the way we think and act? How do we subtly try to look good in front of other believers?**
- **When you realize that you are more concerned about your own reputation than loving others, what should you do?**
 - o *Confess your sin, repent, trust again in Jesus, knowing that he saves you and is ready through the Holy Spirit to continue helping to change your heart and your actions.*
- **What are some specific ways that such a Pharisee attitude can hurt the way we approach our daily devotions or other spiritual disciplines?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion)

- **How do you sometimes think or behave like the Pharisee? How does the attitude of the Pharisee affect your spiritual disciplines such as participating in church, doing daily devotions, or avoiding particular sins?**
- **Are you ever tempted to do or say something among fellow Christians that, deep down, is mainly an effort to impress people and look good? What are specific ways that you sometimes brag about your spirituality in "humble" ways? What would repentance look like for you now?**