

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND TAX-COLLECTOR

Luke 18:9-14

We know from personal experience that things are not always what they appear to be. People are not necessarily what they might seem to be on the surface. The parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector causes us to be reminded of this fact of life. It is a story in which we find a reversal of the normal human perception of spirituality. Let's read it in Luke 18:9-14.

Luke 18:9. And He also told this parable to certain ones 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-gatherer.

11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

13 "But the tax-gatherer, 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 down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

Essentially, this parable is about attitudes, the attitude of the heart. Having the right attitude is one of those things that you cannot afford to neglect as a follower of Christ.

You see, everybody has to face certain kinds of events. The circumstances are different from one individual to another. Some may have a harsher life than others. But this is not where the Bible puts the emphasis. From God's perspective, it is not so much the events (as difficult as they may be) that matter as the way we deal with those events. How do we react to the circumstances of life? What is our attitude when something happens to us? That's what matters to God. And this passage describes to us the attitude of the heart that He commends.

Two men praying

The parable comes in the context of teaching about prayer. It tells us about two people praying in the temple. The first man is a Pharisee; the second one is a tax-collector.

The Pharisees were an influential group of religious leaders in Israel. They pledged to obey every minute detail of God's law and often went beyond the letter of the OT law in their personal lives. Although Jesus was often critical of the Pharisees, this should not obscure the fact that they were well-respected people in the society. In the Jewish perception, the Pharisee was an example of godliness.

The tax-collectors were as bad in most people's eyes as the Pharisees were good. Nobody liked them. This was not just normal popular resentment against taxes. They were seen as traitors to their own country because they were collaborating with the foreign imperialists, the Romans, by raising taxes for them. That is why the question of tax for Caesar was a very sensitive one. It was used to put Jesus on a hot spot (Matthew 22:15-22). In asking about the legitimacy of paying tax to Caesar, Jesus' enemies were hoping that He would get into trouble either with the authorities on the one side or with the people and their hatred of the foreign taxes on the other. Tax-collectors were also hated because of their corruption. There were few checks on their powers, so most of them overcharged the people, and kept the profits to themselves.

You can easily understand that because of popular ill will against them, tax-collectors did not usually come to the temple. The fact that this one came to pray added interest to the story.

It is also important to mention that the expectation of Jesus' initial listeners was that the Pharisee would be the hero of the story. Therefore, to read the parable well requires a positive starting image for the Pharisee and a negative one for the tax-collector. It is the work of the parable then to overturn this view.

A proud Pharisee

In his prayer, the Pharisee compared himself against a variety of violators of the commandments: Extortioners, unjust, adulterers, tax-collectors. The specific reference to the tax-collector standing near him shows a judgmental attitude because he instantly made an evaluation of the man on the basis of his vocation.

Part of the reason for the Pharisee's sense of superiority is the religious activity he was engaged on. In v. 12, two practices are singled out: Fasting and tithing.

Fasting was mandatory for the Jewish people only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29). This Pharisee went far beyond the requirements of the Law in his fasting twice a week.

He also went beyond the letter of the OT Law in tithing. The Law prescribed that certain crops be tithed (Deuteronomy 14:22). But this Pharisee said that he tithes one tenth of all that he acquires. Imagine! He tithed not only ten percent of his income but also ten percent of all that he possessed. What does that mean? Let's suppose that he buys some corn. In accordance to the Law, the corn should have been tithed already by the grower. But he cannot be absolutely certain. Therefore, to be on the safe side, he gives a tithe. And he repeats the same action every time he gets something. In this way, he is sure that he doesn't have anything which could be unclean. Wow, this is religious zeal carried to the maximum!

There is no reason for us to doubt that what the Pharisee said about himself was untrue. But somehow, we are not touched by his accomplishment. We have the feeling that it built no bonds to those with whom he shared life in Palestine. Rather, it drove him away from others. His apparent devotion to God did not move him to have compassion for his fellow men. This Pharisee began his prayer by attributing his own upstanding life to the grace of God. But if grace does not lead to grace, his attitude is all wrong. His prayer was in fact more a boast to himself than an expression of worship toward God. He was actually saying, 'I thank you, God, that I am so good!' You see that pride permeated his words.

A humble tax-collector

The tax-collector showed a totally different attitude. Contrary to the Pharisee who stood where people could see him, the tax-collector preferred to remain 'afar off' (v. 13), probably on the outer edges of the court of the gentiles. He just needed a place where he could pray to God undisturbed.

He knew the full extent of his sins and it is with a deeply troubled conscience that he had come to the temple. He felt so unworthy to face God that he could not even make himself look up to heaven. V. 7: *He would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast...* Beating one's breast is a dramatic gesture used to signal contrition. The tax-collector knew that he hurt God terribly and that he deserved only His anger.

He called himself not 'a' sinner but 'the' sinner. He did not feel that he was just 'a sinner' like everyone else. He had such a conviction of sin that He felt that he was 'the sinner', the sinner par excellence, the one who had hurt and shamed God more than anyone else, the one who was more undeserving than anyone else. He very much expressed Paul's feeling about himself in 1 Timothy 1:15: *... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.* The apostle Paul, before he became a Christian, persecuted the church of God. Many Christians lost their lives at his hands. He never forgot that. 'I, the chief sinner. The worst sinner of all'. This is precisely what the tax-collector was saying.

Not only did the tax-collector confess that he was a sinner, he also cried out for mercy. *God, be merciful to me* (v. 13)... The original sense of the word 'be merciful' (*hilaskomai*) is 'be appeased', and it is a word used in connection with atoning sacrifices. We find the same word in Hebrews 2:17 where we read that Jesus, as our high priest, was able *to make a sacrifice of atonement (hilaskomai) for the sins of the people.* The tax-collector's cry can well be translated, 'Let me be atoned'. He knew that he deserved God's anger. He knew that the only way that he could ever be accepted by God was for God to have mercy upon him and to forgive his sins. He had nothing to impress God, no righteousness to offer Him. He can only hope that God would accept him as he came to God in all the desperation and sincerity of his heart, and begged God for mercy. God alone was his hope, and mercy alone was all that he could plead. In this we see the essence of grace.

Surprisingly enough (remember that the opening view was that Pharisees are good and tax-collectors are bad), the tax-collector is the one 'justified' in the sight of God. Jesus said, *This man went down to his house justified rather than the other* (v. 14)... The tax-collector went down from the temple in a state of acceptance because he had the kind of attitude that God responds to and honors in the one who approaches Him. The basic spiritual principle is this: Humility before God is what He finds acceptable. This is clearly expressed by Jesus in His last comment. *He who humbles himself will be exalted.* The penitent sinner who approaches God humbly and looks for His mercy will find it. He will be exalted.

Deceptive assurance

Some Christians like to talk about their assurance of salvation. They say, 'I am a born again Christian. I will certainly walk with God to the end of my life. I have the absolute confidence that Jesus will raise me up at the last day and I will enter His kingdom forever'. Yes, there is such a thing as the assurance of salvation, which is based on the promises of God. But there is also a wrong kind of assurance that can lead people into thinking they are going to heaven when in fact they are not. It is the case with this Pharisee.

Look at him again. It is clearly a picture of assurance. The first verse of the parable begins like this. V. 9: *And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous...* They had a trust in themselves that they were righteous. Oh yes, this Pharisee had

assurance. His whole behavior was one of assurance. He had confidence that he was righteous and therefore that he was saved. To be righteous is to be saved. He had such an assurance of salvation that he was able to say, 'I thank God that I am not like those people who are not saved'.

But his assurance was badly founded. His error lies in the fact that he trusted in himself. Because he has remained legally and ritually pure, and because he has fasted regularly and has tithed faithfully, he was certain that he can approach God and almost demand justice as a matter of personal right.

If you say to him that his assurance is not in God but in himself, he would have strongly objected. He believes in God and he does not see himself doing anything that is opposed to God. The apostle Paul made this observation concerning Israel in Romans 10:2. *For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.* The Jews had a zeal for God, they were devoted to God, but not in the right way. V. 3: *For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.* They were religious but not spiritual. Religion can be a major obstacle in the way of the kingdom of God, giving people a false sense of security and preventing them from responding appropriately to God's grace. It was on the basis of his religious activity that the Pharisee asserted his superiority over other people. He felt that he has gone beyond the call of duty, so God should approve of him and even be impressed with his record of service. He was wrong.

The Lord Jesus talked about a Pharisee in His story. But the introduction in v. 9 broadens the application to all who are convinced that they, on their own merits, are acceptable to God. If we are totally honest, I think we can all catch glimpses of the Pharisee's attitude in our own lives. It is indeed a warning to us to be careful how we view ourselves, lest we become guilty of the same misdirected self-confidence.

What about the tax-collector? Did he have assurance? No. He completely lacked self-confidence. As we see in his behavior and in his prayer, he was in despair. He could not see anything in him that would meet God's approval. Feeling totally unworthy, he threw himself upon God's mercy. Then he left the temple and disappeared. Did he think that God heard him? We don't know – probably not. And there was no one around to give him assurance.

Then Jesus said, 'This tax-collector might not have assurance at that time. But I tell you, he is the one who is justified. Not the Pharisee'. The tax-collector may not have had assurance when he left the temple. But sooner or later, he will have assurance, true assurance. Nobody who has this kind of attitude will be out of touch with God for very long. God will come to him. He will speak to him. He will commune with him. And he will begin to experience what Paul described in Romans 8:16. 'The Spirit Himself bears witness with my spirit that I am a child of God'. Anyone who approaches God with this attitude of humility will come to know God as a living reality. He will meet with God.

Growing in gratitude

If the tax-collector had heard Jesus say to him, 'I grant you mercy. Today, you are justified,' what do you think would have been his reaction? I think he would have fallen on the ground, crying, with a deep sense of gratitude filling his heart. Here I would like to talk about a vitalizing principle of spiritual growth, the principle of gratitude.

We enter into the Christian faith with an attitude of humility, recognizing that we come before God empty handed, that we have nothing with which to impress God or require Him to bless us. That we are sinners who only know life because we live under His mercy, and that it is by virtue of the love demonstrated for us in the cross of our Lord Jesus that we are saved. If we are truly humble, there is only one way to respond to such a love: Gratitude. The Christian is indeed a grateful recipient of

God's love. Gratitude is so central to what it means to be a Christian that it simply does not make sense to be a believer and to lack in gratitude.

The apostle Paul in Romans 1:21 speaks of the pagans as those who 'refused to give thanks'. In turning away from sin, we turn from a lack of gratitude to an attitude of thanksgiving for God's mercy. But this should not be limited to the conversion experience. As we walk with our Savior, we are to grow in gratitude in such a way that it permeates every dimension of our being. It should become a habit of the heart, a hallmark of our lives. In this way, we learn to see God's goodness even in the midst of difficulty. We learn to give thanks even in the midst of suffering.

In fact, I would not hesitate to say that there is a direct correspondence between the depth of our gratitude and the vitality of our spiritual life. The more we can appreciate the goodness and the mercy of God, the more our spirituality will mature.

Furthermore, there is probably no greater motivation for the work of God's kingdom than a profound awareness of His mercy. There are many legitimate factors that can sustain and motivate a Christian in his service for the Lord. Some speak of the glory of God and His holiness. For others, it is the love of truth. There is also the passion for justice, or the longing to respond to the brokenness of the world. But you know, as legitimate as these reasons are, each of these can so easily be twisted and become a zeal without grace and love if the sense of gratitude is absent or barely present. Every time we lose focus of the mercy God demonstrated towards us, something fundamental would be missing in our spirituality.

Let me say it again. There is nothing so crucial to our spiritual growth and our ministries as the deep consciousness of the goodness, the grace and mercy of God. That's what will enable us the most to live with passion and compassion, with love of truth and love of people.

The parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector is a contrastive story with one basic message. It can be summarized by Jesus' final statement: He who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted. The Pharisee is an example of the first, and the tax-collector, of the second. The principle expressed here is eschatological, i.e., it refers to God's exaltation or humiliation of people at the final judgment. This means that whichever one of these two attitudes has reflected our relationship with God in this life, the opposite will characterize our status in the next.