

Love Community Baptist Church

Wednesday Night Virtual Bible Study

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THE PARABLE SERIES

“The Tax Collector and the Pharisee” – Luke 18:9-14

[Luk 18:9-14 KJV] 9 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 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. 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.

CONTEXT OF THE PARABLE

This parable is connected to the preceding material due to its being a parable and its reference to prayer (cf. 18:1, 7 with 18:10–13). Also Luke perhaps placed this parable here to serve as an example of those who will be found faithful when the Son of Man returns (18:8). Thus 18:9–14 and the three following accounts all deal with what it means to have “the faith” (18:8). The theme of the parable, God’s mercy to tax collectors and sinners, has been encountered earlier as has the form, a parable in which the behavior of two characters is contrasted.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14) is rich with spiritual truth. In fact, it contains the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As verse 9 tells us, Jesus spoke this parable to those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others” (NKJV).

Jesus spoke often of the issue of righteousness, pleading with His hearers to understand their utter inability to be righteous enough to attain the kingdom of heaven. This knowledge was essential if they were to understand His mission on earth, which was to save sinners—those who knew they could not save themselves.

Within the parable we encounter a self-righteous Pharisee whose prayer in the temple is essentially a self-eulogy. He thanked God that he was not like others. In itself the prayer could be quite acceptable if the Pharisee were thanking God for protecting him from circumstances that might have led him to become a thief or an adulterer. However the Pharisee saw his not having succumbed to such sins as purely his own doing. There was no thanks for what God had done but rather a long list of personal achievements. (Note all the I’s!) He had no sense of being an unworthy servant and having done only his duty (Luke 17:10). Actually he believed he had done more than God required. He had not only kept the law perfectly and thus did not need to pray for God’s forgiveness, he even fasted twice a week and tithed everything he bought (not just what he earned). His attitude was clear. God was very fortunate to have someone like him. He knew nothing of God’s perfection and holiness and his own sinfulness! He

possessed an unusually high self-worth and had learned nothing from the penitential psalms or such thoughts as Rom 3:10–20, which exclude all such boasting (Luke 17:10; Rom 3:27).

The Pharisees, on the other hand, thought their own goodness was so impressive that it could not fail to make them acceptable to God. They held rigorously to the ceremonies and traditions of the law, making a public show of their religiosity, all to be seen by other men, many of whom they despised as being beneath them. The Pharisee in the story is the epitome of one who is self-justifying. Notice that his prayer has no elements of confession. He does not ask forgiveness for his sins, perhaps because he believes he has nothing to confess. Nor is there any word of praise or thanksgiving to God. His prayer is all about him. Even the thanks he does offer is designed to exalt himself and place himself above others whom he treats with disdain. Going to the temple to pray with the condition of his heart as it was, he might as well have stayed home. Such a “prayer” is not heard by God.

In contrast the tax collector demonstrated his attitude even by his physical stance. He stood “at a distance,” “would not even look up to heaven,” and “beat his breast” (Luke 18:13). Even apart from his prayer he exhibited humility and contrition. His prayer sought God’s mercy and forgiveness just like the psalmist (Ps 51:1). The result, which would have been shocking for many of Jesus’ hearers, was that the sinner who sought God’s mercy left justified, not the Pharisee.

In addition, we must not make the mistake of comparing ourselves with others and gaining confidence from what we see in that comparison. In fact, Jesus specifically warns us against this attitude at the beginning of the parable. When we try to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, we naturally end up despising them. Our standard for comparison is God Himself, and we all fall short of His glory (Romans 3:23).

What is the difference between obedience to God’s mandates and self-righteousness?

EXPOSITION

Looked down at everybody else. Compare 23:11; Acts 4:11. Those who like the publican understand their sinful condition and know that they can only be saved by grace, find it difficult to despise others, for there is nothing of which they can boast. Only those who possess a false confidence in their own righteousness look down at others.

define “look down at others”

Verse 11

The Pharisee stood up. This was the normal posture for prayer. Since the publican stood “at a distance” in the temple, the implication is that the Pharisee stood “at the front.”

Prayed about himself. This can also be translated “prayed these things to himself” and can mean that his prayer never went to God because he was only talking to himself or that he was praying silently and not aloud. The former is too subtle and the latter is too contrary to normal Jewish practice. It is best to interpret this as the NIV does.

God, I thank you. Note that there was no petition in the Pharisee’s prayer. He really did not need God.

I am not like other men. If humility toward God and compassion for neighbor are excluded, the Pharisee possessed an impeccable life-style. But humility toward God and compassion for neighbor are the essence of true piety.

Robbers, evildoers, adulterers. The first and third sins are forbidden in the Decalogue (Exod 20:14–15). The middle term (*adikoi*, unrighteous, evildoers) is more general and may be present to match the term “righteous” (*dikaioi*) in Luke 18:9.

Verse 12

I fast twice a week. A “fast” would generally involve going without food or drink from sunrise to sunset. This is the earliest reference to the Jewish practice of fasting twice a week (cf. Did. 8:1). The two days of fasting mentioned in the Talmud are Monday and Thursday (*Ta’an. 1:2a*).

Give a tenth of all I get. Compare Luke 11:42.

Luke 11:42 (NIV) “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

The Pharisee did more than the law demanded in that he tithed everything that came into his possession, not simply what he earned. He may have done this in case the person who sold this to him had not tithed it. By these two acts the Pharisee boasted of his works of supererogation, i.e., he thought he did more than God required of him.

Needless to say, not all Pharisees trusted in their own righteousness like the one in this parable. Yet unless we claim that the entire Gospel depiction of the Pharisees is incorrect, some Pharisees were like this. That certain Pharisees did think this way is evident from the Talmudic materials.²⁸¹ Similarly, it should not be assumed that all tax collectors were like the one portrayed in the parable, but some were. Thus the parable is not a caricature.

Verse 13

But the tax collector stood at a distance. This indicates that he sensed a personal unworthiness to stand close to the sanctuary.

Would not even look up to heaven. Compare 1 Enoch 13:5. “For from thence forward they could not speak (with Him) nor lift up their eyes to heaven for shame of their sins for which they had been condemned.” For looking up to heaven in prayer, cf. Mark 6:41; 7:34; John 11:41; 17:1; cf. also Ps 123:1.

Beat his breast. As a sign of contrition or grief (cf. Luke 23:48).

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. The verb used here (*hilasthēti*) is found elsewhere in the NT only in Heb 2:17. It means to expiate or propitiate. The noun (*hilastērion*) is used in this sense in Rom 3:25 (cf. also 1 John 2:2; 4:10), and in Heb 9:5 it designates the place where such expiation/propitiation takes place. The publican in his prayer sought God’s mercy in order to have his sins covered and the divine wrath removed from him.

Verse 14

I tell you. Note the Christological claim in these words. Jesus claimed to know the mind of God.

This man, rather than the other. Jesus gave a surprise ending to the parable (cf. Luke 16:8). His audience would have seen the Pharisee as a positive example of true piety and the publican as a negative one of what they should not be like. For Luke's readers, familiar with Jesus' teachings and perhaps even this parable, the ending is not unexpected. They already knew that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11).

Went home. "Went home" is literally went down into his house, i.e., left the temple for home.

Justified. This term means more than just being forgiven, for it also involves the gift of a new standing before God. This is evident from 18:9, where the noun is used to describe a "righteous" standing before God (cf. 16:15). The publican stood before God after his prayer possessing a new relationship (not a moral character) with God. He possessed a righteousness given him by grace (cf. Phil 3:8).

For everyone who exalts himself. The proverb of Luke 14:11 (cf. Matt 23:12) is repeated. For Jesus and Luke, as well as for Paul, salvation was by grace through faith (cf. Eph 2:8). In justifying himself before God, the Pharisee rejected the possibility of receiving God's gift of justification that comes through faith (Phil 3:9). What happens after justification is not mentioned in the parable, but Luke would demonstrate this in the story of Zacchaeus (cf. Luke 19:8).

The Lukan Message

In reading this parable one is reminded of the Pauline teaching on justification by faith. Without reading into the parable the Pauline teaching, it is nevertheless evident that "justification" involves a standing before God rather than a moral perfection or even a moral character. The Pharisee clearly possessed a better moral character than the tax collector, at least from the perspective of his society. He was not a thief, an evildoer, or an adulterer (18:11). He kept the law outwardly far better than the tax collector. But he did not receive the pronouncement of being "justified." The tax collector did. Thus justification must involve a standing before God, for it is instantaneous. Like the Pauline teaching, it involves forgiveness (cf. 18:13 and Rom 4:6–8); but it also bestows a standing, i.e., a declared righteousness. This parable reveals that the Pauline teaching on justification is not an anomaly but is also found in Luke and is ultimately rooted in Jesus' teaching.

Whereas moral renewal (regeneration in John but the baptism of the Spirit in Luke-Acts) can be assumed to have been associated with the conversion of the tax collector, it is neither stressed nor mentioned in our account. A moral character will develop from the baptism of the Spirit that accompanies justification. Out of positional righteousness will develop a concomitant personal holiness. The latter must follow the former, for in the experience of conversion along with one's new standing, God also gives his Spirit (Acts 2:38), making the individual a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Thus, although the metaphor of justification involves a standing before God and has no necessary tie with an obedient life of faith, the experience of conversion, through which justification comes, also bestows at the same time other benefits indicated by such metaphors as regeneration, forgiveness, the baptism of the Spirit, being "in Christ," reconciliation, and sanctification. And these metaphors do reveal a necessary tie between the experience of a new standing before God with an obedient life of faith.

Through this parable Luke sought to teach his readers that their justification was due to God's mercy alone and that they daily needed to pray, "Forgive us our sins" (Luke 11:4). There is no room for boasting (17:10). One can only boast in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17), who has exalted the lowly and brought down the haughty (Luke 1:38, 52–53). Because justification comes when the humble repent and believe

(15:7, 10), the great reversal is taking place. See Introduction 8 (5). Those who like the Pharisee in the parable exalt themselves are humbled, but those who like the tax collector humble themselves and seek God's mercy are exalted and justified by God (14:11; 18:14).

References:

The Bible, King James Version

Robert H. Stein, Luke, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 450–451.