

Sermon: The Importance of Humility

Text: Luke 18:9-14

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Introduction: We learned last week that prayer needs to be persistent and constant in its practice (vv. 1-8). In today's text Luke shares what Jesus believes is important when we pray. Prayer does need to be consistent and constant, but it also must be *genuine*. Amid all the "musts" and "oughts" and the words of command and duty, we are taught grace. Again Jesus uses a parable to make us feel uncomfortable and make us decide how we will approach God in prayer. It is another either/or story. It is difficult from a human perspective, too, because our world is so full of shades of gray and shadows.

This is another of Luke's unique contributions to us, and it lets us hopefully understand more of Jesus' teaching on prayer.

Jesus' intended audience is spoken of in the opening verse, but it leaves the identification up to the reader. **Luke 18:9 (NIV)** ⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: The audience in **verse 9** is "the religious proud" of the day. This parable is addressed to people who are convinced that the reason for their acceptability before God is found in them. Some people's greatest fear is that they will find themselves standing in line at the Pearly Gates behind Mother Teresa, and hear Saint Peter say to her, "Well, you didn't quite make it." The fact is no one is going to heaven on the basis of good deeds. God does not grade on the curve either. It really is as much about a genuine attitude of humility as anything.

Luke 18:10-14 (NIV) ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴"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."

We hear this final saying repeated in **Matthew 23:12** where Jesus talks about the use of titles like Rabbi, father, or Teacher - and the preceding verse reads:

“The greatest among you will be your servant.” Earlier in [Luke 14:11](#) we heard it as well where we saw guests picking out places of honor for themselves at a banquet. For prayer to be what God desires, attitudes must be right. Hearts must be focused on God!

In our parable there are:

I. Two People to Compare ([vv. 10-13](#))

A. Pharisee

The term “Pharisee” literally means *the righteous one* and talks of one who is set apart from others. “Pharisee” in our language has a different meaning. It almost carries the idea of hypocritical and self-righteous. But we need to hear what Jesus’ audience heard. Pharisees were religious heroes, moral, highly respected, and extremely influential in religious matters. It must be significant that this is the only time the term “Pharisee” is explicitly used as an identity for a character in a parable.

A Pharisee’s life centered around the synagogue and keeping the Law. He was a layman. The Pharisees were meticulous about the Oral Tradition which had generated over 1000 regulations just about the Sabbath alone. They were into piety, doing good works. It was their self-appointed duty to preserve morals and correct teaching, to oversee, guide, instruct and disciple the people of God. Discipline framed their very existence.

The Apostle Paul had been a Pharisee before meeting Christ on the Damascus Road. Zacchaeus, who we will meet in the next chapter of Luke was also a Pharisee. Like in any group there must have been both good and bad examples of this working model.

B. Publican (Tax Collector)

One of Jesus’ twelve disciples was a publican, a tax collector. He was known as Levi or Matthew.

A publican worked not for the local government, but for the Roman government. The Romans contracted out the collection of taxes. All that could be brought in beyond what was required could be kept by these “tax farmers” as they were called. Some publicans would take furniture or even clothing to satisfy a tax debt. This system allowed, as you might expect, for a lot of corruption.

Can you imagine the self-esteem problem if you were a tax collector? It would have certainly been difficult for a Jew working for a foreign, hostile government to be collecting taxes from his neighbor for Rome. You would have been viewed as a traitor. How do you think you would feel about yourself? Even in the N.T. tax collectors are listed and grouped with the worst of other sinners. In the first century they were not well-thought of, but these were the very people who wanted to hear Jesus' teaching and eat with him.

Illus. Some of you might remember how it felt when we had U.S. citizens going over to visit North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Jane Fonda was demonized for doing that.

Where the reversal comes in this parable is: the tax collector's conversion is actually used as a model of what it takes to have a proper relationship with God. We must ask ourselves: what about this is praiseworthy?

II. Two Dispositions to Evaluate (vv. 10-13)

You can see it in their:

A. Postures

I am not a big proponent of reading a person's body language, but some things are just obvious.

“It was customary to begin a prayer with a note of thanksgiving. In this case it turned out to be an expression of self-admiration (Ardnt).” - Rienecker, p. 195

That kind of worship is a short step away from the New Age heresy and other philosophies where man is viewed as a god. I, I, I, I, I, I.

You can almost see the two men and how they might have carried themselves differently. The Pharisee had his head up. The Publican beat his chest almost as if he were grieving someone's death. The text said that he would not look up and begged for mercy from God. He may not have even realized who else was around him. The Pharisee was probably looking around to see who would notice he was there.

One man failed in his prayer while the other succeeded. Clovis Chappell points out the “Pharisee had a good eye on himself, a bad eye on his fellows, and no eye at all on God.” It is a matter of perspective. The Pharisee felt he was better than anyone else.

It is about:

B. Attitudes

The psalmists share the importance of a proper attitude: [Psalms 25:9 \(NIV\)](#) ⁹ He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

[Psalms 147:6 \(NIV\)](#) ⁶ The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

Pharisees in many ways were doctrinally true. It was their hearts that were false. In Jesus' time, there were formal prayers and benedictions that were recited much like today. Most of them started with words of praise and thanksgiving for God, but this Pharisee, who was meant to be representative of a group of people, prayed with a holier-than-thou attitude.

A certain Rabbi has been recorded as praying this: "I thank Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou hast put my part with those who sit in the Academy, and not with those who sit at the street-corners. For I rise early, and they rise early; I rise early to the words of the Law, and they to vain things. I labour, and they labour; I labour and receive a reward, and they labour and receive no reward. I run, and they run; I run to the life of the world to come, and they to the pit of destruction." Another Rabbi (Simeon ben Jochai) once said, "If there were only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one I am he!"

- Barclay, *Luke*, p. 233

The Pharisee did not really go to pray; he went to inform God and others how good he was. We are not found to be righteous/justified on the basis of our good works or lack of bad ones. We are accepted on the basis of our attitudes toward God and others. And attitudes transfer eventually into action and deeds disclosing what is really in our hearts.

"The crucial distinction between the Pharisee and the tax collector is not at this point determined by conventional standards of morality, but by what has happened or not happened in the heart in relation to God (Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 241).

It wasn't that the Pharisee wasn't religious or moral or that he wasn't trying . He *was* trying to do and succeeding at doing many things right --- but his attitude... He fasted two days per week (Monday and Thursday [market days]) when it was only necessary to fast once a year (Day of Atonement).

He tithed everything, even items he purchased in case the original owner had not tithed them. Some Pharisees may have given up to 50% of their income to the synagogue. What stewardship or building committee wouldn't want to have this guy as its chairman?

We can, in fact, applaud much of his conduct, but his attitude is offensive. Then we compare him with the tax collector whose life is offensive, but we are moved by his humble attitude. It's hard to take a position of attitude vs. conduct. Though, wouldn't it be great if we could have it both ways: good conduct and great attitude? But this parable is meant to be *realistic*. We all know people like both the characters in the parable.

It is very easy to put ourselves in a critical position against the pharisee, but when we do we are judged by this very parable. Have you ever found yourself being critical of critical people? Sometimes when we look down and despise others, we see them in our own mirrors.

III. Two Points to Understand (v. 14)

Luke 18:14 (NIV) ¹⁴“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.”

A. A person is not justified by what he does

The Pharisees believed by keeping the Law they were preparing for God's Kingdom, i.e. a “works righteousness” In the New Testament we are taught that righteousness comes through faith and that we are saved by grace. “In Jesus' story what both receive (the pharisee and the publican) is ‘in spite of,’ not ‘because of.’” - Craddock, *Luke*, p. 211

Isaiah 58:5 (NIV) ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Go through all the motions you want; God wants our hearts. He does not require that we judge others for how they dress, how they worship, how they talk.

There are two sides of God's nature shown here:

1. Judgment resulting in exclusion

2. Mercy resulting in inclusion

And both are a result of whether we understand *The Importance of Humility*.

“I recall when I heard the news, the disturbing news about Catherine. When I was a fourth grader, we called her Miss Catherine. Boy, she was beautiful, intelligent, gave a lot of attention to all of us, helped us with arithmetic and everything. All the boys in our class had a crush on her. So it was absolutely devastating when I heard about her. In fact, I didn’t believe it. The word was that Miss Catherine had had her ears pierced. Well, it couldn’t be true, because we knew in that little village in west Tennessee what it meant when a woman had her ears pierced. If there was anything revelatory of character, it was having your ears pierced. She had her ears pierced, they said. My older sister Frieda said, ‘Catherine had her ears pierced.’ I said, ‘She did not!’ You see, that meant she was a wanton woman. I just couldn’t believe that my teacher had her ears pierced. It hurts me now to think about it. She had her ears pierced! To have her ears pierced meant that we all knew what kind of person she really was--we knew what she did when she went to town; we knew what kind of entries she put in her diary; we knew what she slept in, if anything. That’s rough when you’re in fourth grade.

I was going to see a widely publicized painting of Christ that was on tour. There was a long line. I went into this booth, and there was the painting. I suppose it was five feet tall; it’s probably life-sized! Jesus was about five feet tall. In this painting was this grotesque, ugly, ugly person. I had always gone to Sunday school in a room that had (*the painter*) Solomon’s head of Christ--I knew how pretty he was. And here was this grotesque creature. Everybody was pouncing on the painting. ‘Why in the world?’ And someone said, ‘Haven’t you read?’ ‘Haven’t we read what?’ ‘He had no comeliness or beauty that we should desire him. He is the one from whom people hide their face. From him they turn away, a man acquainted with sorrow, rejected, despised. Didn’t you know?’ That’s rough.

When you have recently given your life to Christ, and are beginning to hear the first stirrings that soon will be the thundering call to ministry, that is super-intense seriousness. And then you are invited to a party where you can already hear the music. Strange enough, as I approached the door, the music was *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*, and I thought, Boy, this is going to be really something. *Just a closer walk with thee*. I opened the door, and everybody was dancing, cheek to cheek. Just a closer walk with thee. Grant it Jesus if you please, and here were people dancing?! Absolutely devastating. - *Craddock Stories*, pp. 77-78

B. Humility is a requirement for entering the Kingdom

Humility is important in the presence of a holy God. There are two reasons the Pharisee is not justified as he leaves the place of prayer:

- 1. He thought he was better than the tax collector. God does not want us to keep people away from him through our holier-than-thou attitudes.**
- 2. He is judging himself by a wrong standard. God is the Judge and our only standard.**

“The house of the self-righteous is a house without doors and windows; it allows no outlook on God and the real situation of the neighbour.” Hendrickx, p. 238

Conclusion: Of course, it is one thing to compare, evaluate and understand what may hinder a person from entering the kingdom. It is yet another, to point it out to others. Jesus dared to do this with the Pharisees of his time. “It was an act of unparalleled risk which Jesus performed when, from the full power of his consciousness of sovereignty, he openly and fearlessly called these men to repentance, and this act brought him to the cross.” - Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus*, p. 267

To whom do you think Jesus was talking when he gave this parable? It could have been the Pharisees certainly, but it also might have been the Church, specifically his disciples. They had said that there were others who were casting out demons and they weren't a part of Jesus' group. You remember the disciples who tried to keep the sick and disenfranchised away from Jesus.

“You children there, get away from the Master.” They were always trying to protect the Master from the sick and wounded of society, but it was, in fact, those same people who Jesus had come to save.

He came to save us all! For that we must give thanks!