

## Luke 18:9-14

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector falls under the category of Jesus' minor parables. In most cases it is not interpreted cautiously like the other major parables like the parable of the prodigal son and the parable of the Sower. In fact, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a surprising story full of plot twists and rich spiritual truths, so it deserves careful interpretation just like any other parable.

Literal interpretation causes us to often miss the shocking nature of this parable because it's become so commonplace. Generally, we tend to immediately associate the Pharisees with self-righteous hypocrites and tax collectors as the model of righteous. But in Jesus' day it was reversed. It was the Pharisees who were the models of righteous and the tax collectors typified sinners. When Jesus told this parable it was a shock to his audience and surely made a lasting impact.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a parable of two contrasting prayers from two very different people. Luke tells us up front: **"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable."** This parable is about pride and humility. It is a parable of grace. Now, the audience is likely expecting the Pharisee to be the prime example of what we would look like. After all, no one expected the low-life tax collector who betrayed his own people for money to be the prime example to follow.

But Jesus is about to shock his audience. Look at this prayer that the Pharisee prayed, who's he praying to? He's not praying to God; he's praying to himself. The Pharisees considered themselves worthy of God's grace based off their religious performance. They thought they earned the right to demean others and make demands. And this prayer shows this self-righteous attitude. In **Luke 18:11** the Pharisee is demeaning others to elevate himself. Even going so far to point out a particular person around him, the tax collector. He thinks he is better than them.

In verse 12 the Pharisee reports all the wonderful things he does. He fasts twice a week and **gives a tenth of all he gets**. The Old Testament Law only required a fast once a

year. But the Pharisees fasted twice a week. But really this is just a ploy to attract attention to themselves. These were the days the market convened, and many people came to town. They were just showing off. And the Pharisee in this parable is proud of his religious piousness. His entire prayer centers around how great he is and how terrible everyone else is, especially the tax collector. If you count it up, he uses the pronoun "I" five times in this prayer. His prayer is all about himself.

On the other hand, nobody in Jesus' day would expect a tax collector to be the example for anything good. They were considered the lowest of the low. When the Romans conquered the Jews, they set up a tax collecting system that forced Jewish leaders to collect taxes from their own people. The deal was you sent Rome their tax and then you were allowed to keep an additional amount you chose to collect. This led to tax collectors getting rich by effectively stealing from their own people. To say they were hated is too mild, they were enemies of the community.

But Jesus as usual flips the script. The reason why C. H. Dodd would call the kingdom of God a place of upside-down rules. Look at the tax collectors prayer: "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.'" (**Luke 18:13**). His prayer is a glaring contrast from the Pharisee's prayer. He stands at a distance and refuses to assume the normal posture of prayer of looking to heaven, as the Pharisee did. The tax collector recognizes his unworthiness and is like a child who knows he is in trouble and refuses to look his parents in the eyes.

While the Pharisee used his prayer to beat down others, the tax collector beats his own chest, further showing that he understands his own sinfulness. And when the tax collector prays, he does not pray to himself, he prays to God. It is a simple prayer in which he recognizes his only hope is for God to save him. The Pharisee used his prayer to elevate himself as the righteous. The tax collector used his prayer to elevate himself as the sinner. The tax collector did not boast of his own righteousness but pled with God for mercy acknowledging his sin. He used God as the standard of righteousness and confessed that he fell short. He knew that his only hope was God's mercy.

In the last verse of this parable Jesus tells us what the application is: **“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14).** Ironically both men got what they prayed for. The tax collector humbly asked for mercy, and he received it. The Pharisee asked for nothing because he thought that he already had it all, and he received nothing. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector shows us whose prayers God respects. It is not those who appear righteous and exalt themselves, but rather those who humble themselves because they see how sinful they really are. The reversal of this story does not seem shocking to us today as it would have for Jesus’ audience. But it should, at least a little bit.

We like to point the finger at the Pharisee, but the reality is we probably have a little of his attitude in our hearts as well. And this parable should cause us to pause and reflect, who are we more like? In some cases, we find comfort in realizing that we are better than others. However, the teaching from today’s gospel is that in the journey of Christianity we are not competing with anyone because no one is a model for righteousness except God himself. Paul understood this when he said, “I fought a good fight, I finished my race and I have kept the faith”. He is glorifying God not because he outran others in race but because God’s grace enabled him to complete the race. This does not mean that we should stop to be each other Sisters and Brothers keeper but we should demean each but instead we should constantly ask for God’s grace. Amen.