

The Peril of Self-Satisfaction

Luke 18:9-14

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Immediately preceding this parable is the parable of the persistent widow, which was about how God's righteousness will eventually be demonstrated to everybody that comes to Him in prayer. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is also about prayer, but this time it has to do with how God assesses people's hearts when they pray. In both parables, the main point is not about what we pray for, but rather about the character of the One we pray to. We must understand to whom we pray and align our will with His.

We are so used to Pharisees being legalistic hypocrites that we forget that in their time they were popular and respected Jewish leaders, admired by the people. Pharisees were the descendants of a reform movement that strived to contextualize the Law so that Jews would know how to apply it to their daily lives. They believed this kind of obedience would result in the restoration of Israel. Thus they were also nationalistic and hated Gentiles. The modern equivalent would perhaps be the conservative and politically-driven far right.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were a stigmatized second-class. They were considered traitors because they collected taxes for the Roman oppressors. Even worse, they made a profit by imposing surcharges above the required tax. Among other outcasts, tax collectors were looked down upon by Pharisees. In the New Testament no other profession is so often and shockingly grouped with sinners. A modern equivalent of such a stigmatized group would perhaps be divorced parents, homosexuals, foreigners, or the homeless.

When the Pharisee goes to pray, he stands up by himself, away from the contaminating crowds that could compromise his ritual purity. He calls attention to himself during prayer and arrogantly thanks God that he is not like the criminals. It was a common Pharisaical prayer to thank God that one was born free, a Jew, and a man. (Paul addresses this in Galatians 3:28, saying that these distinctions mean nothing in Christ). The Pharisee goes on to boast about his extra meritorious deeds, like fasting twice a week (instead of the required once a year on the Day of Atonement), and tithing every single thing (rather than just the harvest).

On the other hand, the tax collector stands at a distance, to avoid contaminating others. He recognizes his weakness and is so humble that he can't even look to heaven. He beats his breast, which is a sign of weakness because it was usually done only by women. In his prayer he

simply asks for God to have mercy on him, a sinner. The word he uses connotes being propitiated. It means having peace between God and sinners through an atoning sacrifice. He knew that nothing he did could bring him close to God, and that an atoning sacrifice was the only way to have peace with God. Just like David in Psalm 51, he knows he sinned and needs forgiveness.

Shockingly, Jesus says the tax collector went home justified (meaning acquitted), not the Pharisee (v. 14). The tax collector deserved to be punished, and the Pharisee obeyed all the rules, so what was the Pharisee's mistake? By showing contempt toward people like the tax collector the Pharisee broke the commandment to love others, which is also in the Law. Do you know seemingly pious Christians who have no love for those who are different? Such people do not know the character of God. He is not impressed with outward piety but rather He shows mercy and responds to the needs of His people. Those with the right attitude recognize they are totally dependent on His mercy. Reflect on your own attitude. Do you discriminate or keep your distance from those who are different? Even if you have been discriminated against, do you judge those who judged you? If there is anyone who you are convinced is not saved, rather than condemn them you should strive to bring them to Christ. Would your non-believing acquaintances say that you were loving toward them? Why is it that when people think of evangelical Christians they think of their stance on social issues rather than how they show God's grace to others? The gospel is about God's love for sinners. He welcomes them if they turn to Him, even before they clean up their lives. None of us will completely rid our lives of sin until Jesus returns, yet God has already given us eternal life while we are still sinners. Let us still pray and strive therefore to be obedient, yet humbly cast out any thought that exalts ourselves or views others with contempt.