

*The Parables of Jesus: Humility In An Age Of Self-Promotion*

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*Proverbs 11:2, 15:33, 18:12, 22:4; 1 Peter 5:6-11; Luke 18:9-14*

Our final Scripture reading today is from Luke 18:9-14. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The 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. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 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.’ 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.””

Can anything shock us these days? As a culture, we’re a bit jaded. Take music for example. If we’re old enough, we might remember hearing the Beatles for the first time – but their debut came nearly sixty years ago. Now we’ve heard so much music influenced by the Beatles, we’ve heard the Beatles playing as background noise at the supermarket for so long, we don’t have a sense of how revolutionary they seemed at the time. The shock of the Rolling Stones, Led Zepplin, huge bands, are now back half a century ago.

There were reports of people fainting in the movie theater when the original *Dracula* came out in 1931. Same thing was reported when *Psycho* hit in 1960. Now we can see more gore on evening crime shows on the major networks than you would see in many horror movies in the 1970s. When we become familiar with anything – a style of music, violence in entertainment, even having the Internet at our fingertips 24/7 – we become used to it. It fails to shock us because we’re just used to it. We may not understand what made it so shocking in the first place!

I want us to keep that in mind when we study the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. If we’ve been in church a while, we are familiar with the story. We have heard Jesus and John the Baptist speaking negatively about the Pharisees, so we know they’re almost always the bad guys in every story. We expect that. We aren’t always sure who the Pharisees were, but we know they were bad. None of us much likes the IRS, so we don’t expect we’re going to love the tax collector, but he’s just doing his job, right?

But this story would have absolutely shocked all of Jesus’ listeners. This is the kind of story that some people might have heard and said, “I just can’t follow this Jesus fellow any more.” And what’s more, this story encapsulates the core message of the gospel in a nutshell. If you understand the context of the story, if you understand its shock value, you’ll also understand why this story contains a central key to understanding real Christianity, and how far off the mark many beliefs about Christianity are.

So let's look at why this story of Jesus would have dumbfounded His contemporaries. To get it, we have to understand who the Pharisees were and their importance. If you've been a part of the congregation a while, you might have heard me speak about them before, but it's wise for us to refresh our memories so we truly comprehend who these folks were.

You might remember that the northern kingdom of Israel, called Israel in those days, was exiled permanently around 722 BC. In 586 BC, the southern kingdom of Israel, called Judah, was exiled into Babylon. That exile lasted for 70 years. When Babylon was itself defeated, the remaining exiles with their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren were allowed to return home to Judah. The temple and the walls around Jerusalem were rebuilt.

The exiles understood they had been sent into captivity because of their lack of respect for God and His ways. That was what the prophets had said. The remnant who came home were determined to change things, to never again be so wayward that God would send His people into exile. The Pharisees wouldn't become a major party in Judaism for hundreds of years, but their group was birthed out of the desire to never see Israel shamed in such a way again.

And the Pharisee movement was a grassroots movement. The Pharisees weren't priests but laymen and scribes who diligently studied the Word of God. They came to believe in two laws – the written law of Moses found in the Scripture, and an oral law passed down over the centuries that helped to interpret it. Whenever there was a question about the written law, they would consult what the rabbis and wise men over the centuries had said. They were known for studying meticulously in order to rightly understand God's Word.

Over the course of time, as the Pharisee party began to form, the law around the law, what they called "the hedge around the law," grew with it. The Pharisees were determined to be righteous. They defined many things that God's law left unclear. Things like, what was the formal definition of work to be avoided on the Sabbath day? What actions must you do to honor your mother and father? How often should you fast? It was no longer an issue of uncertainty or ambiguity. The Pharisees gave a full structure to how one could live life in a righteous way. And in their understanding, they made the law more strict this way. The "hedge" they created meant that they always erred on the side of caution. Surely God would be pleased by this.

And let's be clear – right up to Jesus' day, the Pharisees were known for their strict adherence to the law and their commitment to studying the Scriptures. The way these folks acted put many Christians today to absolute shame. The Pharisees gave a 10% tithe of everything they earned. And I mean everything! Jesus acknowledged when He was teaching against them that they gave back to God even 10% of the smallest plants growing in their gardens.

The Pharisees were honored throughout the country because of their right living. On the outside, they had it all together. They gave generously to the temple, they read their Bibles, they prayed constantly, they fasted, they worshiped. They were zealous for God! So zealous, in fact, that they weren't just concerned about themselves. They were concerned that other Jews, other Hebrews, were living right. They made it their business to try and shame people into living righteously, or if that didn't work, to try and disconnect themselves from those who didn't. They were earnest about evangelism – Jesus said they would cross land and sea to make a convert.

And here's another point – when Jesus tells this parable, He doesn't say that the Pharisee was lying in any way. He was glad he wasn't a notorious sinner. He did fast twice a week. He did tithe. None of that is in dispute. If we were asked to measure the external evidence of our relationship with God to the average Pharisee – not a Pharisee at the level of say Saul, who was primed to become a leader of the movement before his conversion, just an ordinary Pharisee – we would probably all come up very short. Most of us don't spend as much time in a week as a Pharisee spent each day practicing the externals of righteousness.

And yet...in 2019, according to Inc Magazine, 83% of Americans believed that people are fundamentally good. But we also believe that we are morally superior to other people too, according to 2017's Scientific American. A study in 2017 reported by The Independent, a UK newspaper, found that 98% of British people believe they are nicer than half the population of the country. So even if we don't have the good deeds of the Pharisee, we tend to think of people as good, and ourselves as especially good. The average person believes in their own self-righteousness.

We live in an age of self-promotion, where humility is a one way ticket to nowhere. Instead, we're told, you are good and worthy of praise. Our films tell us, believe in yourself. Each new YouTube influencer believes that they are worthy of having millions of viewers each week. Be yourself; promote yourself; be an entrepreneur with all your great ideas. *Your* truth is what matters. You *are* good; in fact, you're more than good, you're a winner, a champion. You deserve it all. You deserve fortune and fame and acclaim. Because, deep down, you're a good person. These are the messages the culture has for us, that we believe. And if we don't believe them, there are plenty of courses to take, shows to watch, leaders to reinforce it for you.

But there was a problem for the Pharisee, and it's a problem for us today. No matter how good that Pharisee was in terms of external adherence to the Law of Moses, no matter how many Bible studies he did, no matter how many sacrifices he made, he was still not righteous before God. Why not? Because his life was still a compromise.

The Pharisees, known for their righteousness, still found plenty of ways to skirt the law. They held common people to a standard they themselves didn't keep. Wanted to avoid giving your money to help your parents out? Declare it "corban", which means "devoted to God," and you could use it until you died without helping your parents a lick. Wanted to travel on the Sabbath? Leave clothes around at your relatives' homes so you could call each one your residence and get around the law. And because a widow didn't have rights over her late husband's property, it was considered fair game – and all under the Pharisee's idea of holiness. As Jesus would say, they ignored the greater matters of the law like justice and mercy.

Ultimately, the first of the two keys deep within this passage is this: *no one is good enough to merit, earn, or deserve God's favor*. Not you, not me, not anybody. If it's up to us and our own righteousness, we're all headed for hell, no questions asked. On our own merits, we are doomed to fail. Remember what Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount? "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." That's the standard. Either you meet His standard or you are disqualified. Jesus was blunt about it, saying, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

We might think, “Isn’t the standard awfully harsh? I mean, a 99% was a pretty great grade in school!” Of course, you’d be right in thinking that way. But I think the perfection of God is less like a grade, which records what you learned, and more like your state of being. Think of it this way: does it really matter if your steak went bad yesterday or six weeks ago? It’s either safe to eat or not; no middle ground. A car with the brake lines cut is still 99% operational. But try to stop, and you’ll see how important that 1% really can be. A person who is 99% righteous still cannot stand before the holiness of God and live.

This is the bad news before the good news. There is no hope of saving yourself. There’s no hope of “good enough.” And the proud – those who believe and act like they are worthy on their own merits – will face a terrible judgment when the time of God’s justice comes about. This is the great danger of our modern age...we are being taught to act like children of perdition rather than children of the King of heaven!

This would be the first great shock of the story – that the Pharisee would not be justified before God. If not the Pharisee, then who? If the world’s most righteous Jews in terms of following the externals of the Law of Moses were not saved, who could be saved? If the people who spent their days praying and studying the holy books were in trouble, what about the rest of us? This is a lynchpin behind so much of Jesus’ teaching – He is desperately trying to rid us of the idea that we can merit God’s eternal favor.

But with the bad news comes the good news, which is told to us through the tax collector. And again, we need some context to realize just how despised a tax collector really was. In Jesus’ day, the Romans ruled Judah. There was an uneasy truce between Rome and Jerusalem. The whole region was occupied by Roman soldiers. The faithful Jews hated this. They saw their culture being deeply influenced by Greek philosophy and Roman paganism and they were mortified. God’s Messiah was supposed to lead His people to domination over the nations, and instead they were being corrupted by those very nations.

But the worst of it were the traitors, the collaborators, those who not only made peace with Rome but made money off the backs of their fellow countrymen. For those of you old enough to remember the Cold War, imagine if you will an American neighbor who sold out to the Russians. Think how you’d feel. Now imagine that the Cold War had gone the other way, that the Soviet Union had won, and you paid your taxes to the Soviet Union through that traitorous neighbor. Now imagine that neighbor could charge what he wanted to you in taxes, if he paid the Soviets their cut. It would be maddening, right? Infuriating!

That was the tax collector in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel. He sold out his fellow Jews and got rich off their tax dollars. He worked hand in hand with the people who laughed at their religion and kept soldiers in barracks right next to the temple. He was hated. He was detested. They were so bad, when they were cursed, they weren’t even lumped in with the rest of the sinners. It was always, “tax collectors and sinners.” There was a special place in hell for these guys.

This is the man who goes to the temple and prays, face down – which wasn't typical in prayer in that day. He stands over in the corner, far away from the Pharisees and people that seem to deserve to be there. He beats his chest in sorrow. He is overcome with grief and shame. He cries out to God for mercy and he admits that he is a sinner. He is as bad as they say. He has no merit, and he knows it. His only hope is God's mercy.

This is the man that God declares is justified before Him, the one whom God looks upon with favor. If anything, this was even more shocking than the idea that the Pharisee wasn't right with the Lord. That this man could have any hope of redemption after what he'd done? Who'd sold out and made his fortune off the back of his own oppressed people?

Yes, and that's the good news of the gospel in a nutshell. If the bad news is that no one is righteous enough to merit God's favor, the good news is this: *no one is so unrighteous that God will not show His love and mercy to them when they repent.* Salvation doesn't come through ourselves and our works, but as Ephesians 2:8-9 puts it, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so no one can boast." If a miserable tax collector, traitor, worst of the worst, could be declared righteous before God, there's hope for everyone.

This is indeed good news for everyone who's known they don't measure up. For the person who realizes they've fallen short of the mark, who's sinned against God, who has messed up in a big way, this is the best news ever. It means that the grace of God can extend even to them. The fallen can be forgiven; the wayward can be redeemed; the prodigal (whom we'll study coming up) can come home. All it takes is a heart softened by God, willing to confess, willing to change, to admit fault and to turn to God in true sorrow for forgiveness.

Jesus' death and resurrection, which we celebrate in the weeks to come, makes it so that anyone who comes to Him genuinely seeking His mercy will receive His righteousness in place of their own. Through His sacrifice, we are declared righteous by the Father, and through the Holy Spirit, we begin the process of being made truly righteous as well. And so I want to encourage anyone watching today, if you have not turned to Christ, if you have not asked for forgiveness, if you know that you lack standing before God, turn to Him today to follow Him, to spend your life in the pursuit of Him. He will forgive you and set you free of Your sins, and He will lead you in a new, worthwhile way of life.

But there's a rub here, isn't there? The final thing we need to talk about. To admit we need forgiveness, that we need mercy, we need grace that we don't merit and don't deserve? That's hard. That means swallowing our pride. The exalted will be humbled and the humbled exalted, Jesus says. The only way we're going to enter into the Kingdom of God is in humility, not pride. And this is so hard because the world screams "pride" at us from every angle.

But it comes down to the simple choice. Jesus said the Pharisee prayed about himself. He was ultimately elevating himself to god status. "Look how good I am! Look how worthy of praise I am!" We have to watch ourselves in this. Some worship songs, written by well-meaning people, we don't sing because they wind up focusing on the goodness of the singer more than the greatness of our God. In a world of influencers, it's not surprising.

But the tax collector didn't pray about himself. He prayed to God for the mercy of God. That humility, that bowing the knee to God and asking for undeserved favor – that is what God desires. That is why God sent His son to us, so that any who might believe in Him (rather than themselves) might not perish but have everlasting life.

Will we bow the knee and bend our hearts to God? Will we not cling to the idea that we are worthy of God's heaven but humble ourselves and ask His grace be poured out on us? May it be so for all of us.