

Smart and Stupid Things People Say to God • Luke 18:9-14

The ad on television shows a man who invests in stock that soars to amazing heights. He runs down the hall, bursts into the boss's office and tells him that he quits. When he returns to his desk and checks his computer he discovers that the stock he bought has dropped like a rock. Again he runs down the hall shouting to his boss that he was just kidding.

Some people say some really stupid things. They joke about bombs as they go through airport security. They get upset with the power company and cancel their electricity. They tell the police officer that he doesn't know how to operate his radar gun. They call the IRS and request an audit. We have all been there, done that. We have all said some really smart things and we have all said some really stupid things.

Jesus told a story about two men talking to God in prayer. The first said something really stupid and the second said something really smart. The story is in Luke 18:9-14:

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."

Do you notice that Jesus was not talking to everybody? This parable is targeted at a very special audience. If it's not for you, you are welcome to skip this part of Jesus' biography. But, if it is a parable that is for you, then listen up. Jesus said this was for "*some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.*"

I certainly do not want that to be me. I prefer to think of myself as tolerant and humble, not self-righteous and flaunting a superiority complex. So, this is not for me.

And it is not for you, right? Well, let's not be too fast to pat ourselves on the back. We may need to think some more about what Jesus had to say before our self-congratulations begin.

The story takes place in the first century at the temple in Jerusalem. That temple no longer exists. It was destroyed in AD 70 by the army of the Roman general Titus. Today, all that remains are parts of the foundation that we call the "Wailing Wall". A famous Muslim mosque, the Dome of the Rock, now covers the mountain where the

temple once stood. But in Jesus' day the temple was all there, in full operation. It was the center of Jewish religious life.

Religious people were required to go to the temple and offer sacrifices to God once each year. Some went more often. The very religious who lived in the area of Jerusalem would actually go as many as three times a day to pray. The prayer could be private or public.

Frequent visitors to the temple were the Pharisees. They were the religious conservatives of the day. They sought to be more Jewish than anybody else. Their goal was to keep all the rules of the

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Old Testament law and do everything exactly right. Perhaps today we might call them orthodox Jews or fundamentalists of any religious persuasion. They were very devout.

Infrequent visitors to the temple were the tax collectors. Usually they were not very welcome. In fact, for the most part, they were hated. Tax collectors got their jobs by bidding for them with the Roman government. Whoever promised to collect and pay the most was awarded the position. Tax collectors made their living by getting as much as they could from the people and paying as little as they could to the Romans. The difference was theirs to keep. Pretty much everyone hated them. The Romans hated them for keeping money and getting rich. The Jews hated them for stealing their money and paying the Roman army to occupy their country. It was very lucrative and a very unpopular profession. So, it would have been an unexpected surprise for a tax collector to show up at the temple to pray—sort of like the most irreligious person you know coming to church and sitting in the front row.

Imagine we are on a tour of that first century temple in Jerusalem with Jesus as our tour host. As we walk through the temple courtyard Jesus points out a Pharisee who *“stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evil doers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ”*

A lot of good things can be said about this Pharisee. In fact, he said them about himself! His prayer was more of an announcement to people around him than a conversation with God.

You can almost sense the criticism in Jesus’ voice when he said that the Pharisee prayed about himself. I find that troubling because that does not seem too unusual to me. I pray about myself every day. Most people I know pray about themselves on a regular basis. It would seem strange to me for someone *not* to pray about herself or himself. In fact, in the second half of Jesus’ story he commends the prayer of the tax collector—and he prayed for himself as well.

Probably a better understanding of what happened is that the Pharisee prayed *to* himself. He

wasn’t talking to God at all; he was simply talking to himself. His prayer was from him, about him and to him. The Pharisee was full of himself.

It was a most inappropriate way to pray. Prayer is supposed to be *to* God, *about* God and *for* God. As often as we talk to God about our needs and the needs of others, our prayers should always be God-centered. If our prayers are more about us than they are about God, something is wrong with the way we are praying. Our prayers should always place God first and seek to honor God in all we pray about.

There is a warning here for us all. When we pray we need to be sure that we are not just talking to ourselves.

Like many of you, I often talk on my mobile telephone. I try to use my time wisely and seize opportunities to listen to voice mail and return calls. Several times recently I have lost the connection; once Charleen was driving the car while I was engaged in a conversation. I talked for several minutes before I realized that no one was listening; I was talking to myself. It was a little embarrassing and frustrating on the phone, but it is a major mistake in prayer. There is no point to prayer that does not connect to God.

The only way for prayer to connect to God is for that prayer to first be about God, not about us. He must be our first priority. Our goal should be to please him. God first, us second.

“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.’ ” God already knew all about him. It almost seems that he was trying to tell everyone else who would listen. He was bragging.

Our temptation is to beat up on this guy; but wait a minute. He is really quite impressive. He did a lot of good and avoided a lot of bad. He did not steal from others, so that’s good. He did not do bad things to other people. He was faithful to his wife. He fasted twice a week. He donated ten percent of his possessions to religion and charity. You cannot help but be impressed with this man. He was serious about his religion and worked really hard to do what was right. And I think to

myself, how do I compare to him?

How do you compare to him? Do you steal? Do you take things that don't belong to you from your employer? Do you cheat a little on your income tax returns? Do you steal time at work by doing personal business on company time?

Do you do evil? Are you mean-spirited to people you don't like? Do you tell lies that help you but hurt others? What about racial jokes that put other people down?

Do you commit adultery or other sexual sins? Our society increasingly encourages and condones behavior that God says is wrong. Do you excuse immorality by claiming you have a right to personal happiness?

What about fasting? When is the last time you deliberately gave up food for a half day or longer so that you could fully focus on God and prayer? Fasting is a spiritual discipline that can physically engage us in worship and better focus our minds and souls on the Lord. Have you fasted for spiritual purposes in the past week?

Have you been giving away ten percent? It is called tithing—giving to God ten percent of personal income on a regular basis. It is an act of worship and an expression of faith in God, but it is also a way to help the poor and support God's work on earth. This Pharisee not only donated ten percent of his income but ten percent of his net worth. He tithed everything he had.

How do we compare? Well, I hope! I hope we can all acknowledge that we avoid the sins the Pharisee avoided and we all do the good things the Pharisee did. The truth is that many of us do not come close. We know to avoid sin but we choose to sin anyway. We know the good we should do but we choose not to do it. The Pharisee was a better person than many of us.

His problem was not what he did or did not do. His problem was his attitude. He thought he

was better than everyone else and he took special pride in comparing himself to others. It was a deep defect in his character. It was a serious sin in his soul. How sad. He so much wanted to do what was right and he so far missed the mark.

It is an easy mistake to make. It's easy to find fault with other people and try to build us up by tearing other people down. It's easy too feel superior when comparing ourselves to others who do not measure up to our standards and behavior. We like to point out that we have more money, more education, a newer car, a better race, a superior job or a greater spirituality. We like to compete and we like to win. It feels very good to label others as losers and us as winners.

Next on our Jesus-led tour of the temple we pass a tax collector. He is harder to see because *"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.'"*

Tax collectors were not as common at the temple as were Pharisees. Maybe that is why he prayed in the corner. But I suspect there was probably another reason he had come to talk to God and he really did not want anyone else to hear.

There were two common prayer positions for ancient Jews. One was standing with hands lifted, heads turned upward, eyes open. The other common position for prayer was lying flat on the ground, face down. Kneeling to pray would have been unusual; sitting to pray was probably unheard of. Those who stood lifted their heads upward as if looking toward God. Those who laid flat on the ground kept their faces down in deference and humility.

We do not know the position of the tax collector's body, but we are told the direction of his eyes. He looked down. Perhaps his eyes were closed. It was the body language of a humble, broken person. He knew he was not worthy of God. He agreed with the Pharisee that the Pharisee was the better man. He was keenly aware of his sins

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and was overwhelmed by them. He was sorry, sad and probably scared. He could not think of one good reason why God should listen to anything he would pray.

His sense of unworthiness was so profound that he literally beat up on himself. While the Pharisee symbolically beat up on everyone else, the tax collector literally beat up on himself. He prayed the only prayer he dared to pray: *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

This man was really praying. He was connecting to God. He saw God’s holiness and greatness and obviously did not measure up. The Pharisee compared himself to others and came out pretty good; the tax collector compared himself to God and came out a helpless disaster. He knew he was a sinner and he knew he needed help. He did not try to buy, impress, earn or trick; he just prayed the truth: *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

Jesus saw these two men as symbols of us all. He said, *“I tell you that (the tax collector), rather than the (Pharisee), went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

It’s interesting that the “good guy” in this story lost and the “bad guy” won. The Pharisee left a sinner, disconnected from God; the tax collector left a saint, connected to God. And it was not just about going home that day. This is talking about the eternal destiny of these two men.

Jesus was very specific about what made the difference between them. He said, *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* In other words, those who think that their goodness can make them right with God are tragically mistaken. But, those who are humble enough to throw themselves on God’s mercy and ask for salvation are right on. They are the ones God looks on with favor.

A spiritual test question is sometimes asked to determine the very things Jesus was teaching about in this story. It asks, “If you were to die today and you were to stand before God and he were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?”

The Pharisee would say, “I am a good person. I have not done bad things. I have done lots of very good things. So, let me into heaven.” God would sadly reply, “Sorry, but you are not good enough. You are not even close. No heaven for you.”

By contrast, the tax collector would answer that question by saying, “God, nothing about me is worthy to get into your heaven. I don’t deserve heaven. All I can do is ask for your mercy through Jesus Christ.” And God would gladly reply, “No, you are not good enough, but I will count my Son’s goodness on your account. I will grant you mercy. You are forever in.”

What would your answer be? If you are good, that is great. Keep it up. But realize that you can never be good enough for God. You need mercy through Jesus Christ. If you are bad, then stop your sin and do what is right. But first, ask for God’s mercy. Pray a prayer like the tax collector. Right now! Pray, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* Tell him, “I know I can never be good enough, so I accept the goodness of Jesus and commit my life to him forever.”

If you will humble yourself, pray this prayer and commit your life to Jesus, God will forgive your sin. God will guarantee you a place in heaven forever. God will transform your life starting today and lasting forever.

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