

Pharisee & Publican • Luke 18:9–14

It was a wintry February day in London when my wife Charleen and I visited historic Westminster Abbey. We had not come to worship but rather to see the famous cathedral and especially to visit the tomb of David Livingston in the center of the main aisle of the nave of Westminster Abbey.

My attention was particularly drawn that day to two different people. One was a well-dressed and seemingly sophisticated man who came in near the back of the Abbey and sat down. Then he flipped down the kneeling bench in front of him and knelt. I could tell by the movement of his lips and the intensity of his expression that he was praying. It was only a short time later that a disheveled woman came in whose ragged clothes made her look as if she had stepped out of the pages of *Oliver Twist*.

Trying to be as inconspicuous as I could, I stood over to the side and watched them both as they silently prayed. I was intrigued by the intensity with which they addressed God. I could not hear their prayers any better than I can hear yours or any other prayers that are uttered in silence. But those prayers which neither you nor I can hear are heard and understood by God.

And that's what Jesus is talking about in Luke 18:9-14:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The simple message of the parable and the surrounding story is the message that God judges the

proud and justifies the humble. With marvelous teaching skill Jesus communicates this message by telling a story using two men as examples.

One was a Pharisee and the other a publican or a tax collector. A Pharisee was an extraordinarily religious man in first century Palestine who belonged to a very strict sect of Judaism. Pharisees were well known for their legalism. They carefully observed a long list of rules that dealt with almost every area of daily life. Others as well as themselves perceived them to be righteous, law abiding Jews — quite a contrast to the publican who was a tax collector. However, we must understand that a tax collector then was not quite the same as a tax collector in our time and culture. A publican was an agent of the Roman occupation forces who exacted taxes from his own fellow Jews. Jews hated publicans because they were the ones who enabled the financing of that Roman occupation of their homeland. If you were positioning these two men

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on a social ladder of Judaism you would have the Pharisee somewhere near the top and the publican at the bottom.

This Pharisee was simply too good to be

true. He knew his accomplishments and he was proud of them. It seems to be an interesting expression of pride because he really believed in himself. It wasn't that he was trying to deceive anyone. He really believed that he was better than anyone else and he thanked God for it.

The Pharisee had, according to the parable, a double basis for his sense of goodness. The first part of it was his comparison to others. He looked around himself and he saw those who were extortioners, those who were unjust in their dealings with others, those who were adulterers and he even saw a publican or a tax collector and he knew that he was better than them all. When he looked at his own life he knew that he did not take money from people by coercion so he was not an extortioner. He knew that he was not unjust for he had meticulously kept the laws of Phariseism. He'd never been to bed with anyone other than his wife so did not consider himself to be an adulterer, and he certainly was not

taking tax money from his fellow Jews to fund the Roman occupation. So compared to everyone else the conclusion seemed obvious to him — he was better than all those around him. But that was not the only basis for his self-appraisal of goodness. He also was proud of his extraordinary religious behavior.

In those days Pharisees were known to fast twice a week, although the Old Testament law indicated that there was only one required fast in all the 365 days of the year — the Day of Atonement. Pharisees chose to fast every Monday and every Thursday. Those days are of particular interest because those were the market days in Jerusalem. If there were any days of the seven in which someone fasting would stand out either by appearance or behavior it was surely those days.

But it was not just a matter of what he didn't do, it was also a matter of what he did do. He had chosen to tithe everything, even though the Old Testament law only required that he give a tithe (or ten per cent) of farming produce. This man was the type of individual who kept meticulous track of all sources of income and tithed everything. He's the kind of person who, if he got twenty dollars from his mother for his birthday, would give two dollars extra the next time he came to the temple. However, I sense very little hypocrisy in this man in this parable. He really believed that he was better than others.

But he was also a man of prayer. So we must not write him off as someone who was religiously insensitive. We also have to carefully analyze the words that he spoke. He expressed gratitude to God for the way he was and for all that he had. I suppose that if there had been a Gallup poll in Jerusalem that year most people would have agreed with the Pharisee's self-assessment. He would have gotten one of the highest ratings on the "goodness scale."

But he was too good to be true. His goodness may have been evident to him and to those who saw him, but not to God. All of this supposed goodness did not impress God in the least.

In verse 9 Luke concisely explains why Jesus told the parable. Jesus told this parable *to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others*. In fact, God's truth was that this Pharisee wasn't even praying to God. Verse 11 tells us that *the Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself*. I cannot think of a harsher indictment upon

religious persons than to say that when you pray in all of your fervency the only one who hears it is you. God's truth was that this Pharisee was not righteous at all because he was measuring by the wrong standard.

God does not measure righteousness by comparing us to other people but measures righteousness by comparing us to himself. He does not rate us on what we have done but on what he has done for us. The result is eternally different.

Scotsman William Barclay wrote of a trip that he took from his native Scotland down into England by train. As the train passed through the Yorkshire moors he was impressed by a little whitewashed country cottage "which seemed to shine with an almost radiant whiteness." He did his business in England and several days later took the return trip by train back to Scotland. In the meantime there had been a heavy snowfall through Yorkshire. The moors that had been brown and green had been turned white by heavy snow. He looked out the window again and saw that same cottage, but this time he wrote, "It's whiteness seemed drab and soiled and almost gray in comparison with the virgin whiteness of the driven snow."

You see it all depends upon that to which we compare. This Pharisee thought that he looked great because he compared himself to extortioners, the unjust, adulterers and tax collectors. But God's truth was that he looked pathetic compared to the righteousness of God.

What a sobering reality. Do we not also compare ourselves primarily to those with whom we compare favorably? Do we not even as Christians look at other people and say, "They read the wrong books, but I read the right books. They pray, but I pray better. They may go to church, but I go to a better church." We make the comparison to make ourselves come out as good as we can be. It's a temptation and a damaging one not just for individuals but for churches as well.

However, we have to understand that Pharisees are not just a first century phenomenon! In different dress and with different titles, Pharisees abound in every generation. Today's Pharisees think or perhaps pray, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people who take drugs, have AIDS, commit adultery or abuse alcohol. God, I thank you that I have not delved into heresy and false teachings that are not consistent with your word. I thank you, Father,

that I'm not unjust as I see other people are in their businesses. I thank you that I'm an honest person and I do not do the things that other people do morally or ethically or in business or in religion. I thank you, Lord, that I'm faithful in my church attendance and that I scrupulously read the Bible and faithfully pray. I thank you, God, that I am able to write my check each week to you and to be one of your finest supporters."

In fact, modern Pharisees are seldom hypocrites. For when we say such things I think we believe them. We are proud of who we are and what we are not. We are grateful that we are not like the others. And like the Pharisee of long ago we often pray or think such prayers.

The problem is that such Pharisees are too good to be true — so blinded by pride, deafened by their own perspective, that they cannot hear their own words. I hope not to offend you when I say that I think there is some Pharisee in most of us! We're just not tuned to it.

We have disdain for other people who do not measure up to the standards that we have claimed for ourselves and that we have imposed upon other people. Yet, tragically we are so often like the Pharisee in the parable that we cannot see our pride nor hear our self-righteousness. And so Jesus gives us the example of the Pharisee who was too good to be true.

The contrasting example in the parable is the publican who was too true to be good. He was in fact a man who was ruthlessly honest. He was a sinner and he knew it. He reflected his painful honesty in everything from his posture and gestures to his words. As I read his story in this little parable I cannot help but be amazed that he was at the temple for that is not where one would expect to find a publican.

Publicans were not religious people. They were essentially rejected from the religious and cultural community of their day. And so I have to assume that something out of the ordinary had happened that drew him to the temple that day to pray.

This week, as some of you know from reading Wooddale publications, we have a church consultant and author visiting with us. In one of his books he talks about people who have been faithful in church attendance who then become irregular in

their attendance, or those who have been quite irregular who suddenly begin to show up for worship services on a weekly basis or become involved even more deeply in the life of the church. He says that almost always it is an indication that there has been some traumatic change in that individual's personal life. It's a turning point one-way or the other.

I suspect the same thing was true then. The very fact that this publican was there that day at the temple is an indication that perhaps he had lost his job or thought he might. Maybe the Romans had caught him embezzling funds. Or maybe he had discovered a whitened spot on his skin and suspected he might have leprosy. Or maybe he or his wife had had an affair. There was some great change in his life that brought him to God and brought him to the temple to pray.

He came that day knowing that he was a sinner. You could tell it just by looking at him even if you couldn't hear his prayer. For in those days Jews prayed differently than we often think of prayer to-

What he actually prayed was, "God, be merciful to me the sinner."

day — unlike the pair earlier described in Westminster Abbey who got down on their knees and bowed their heads and closed their eyes and whispered their utterances. The Jews who came into the temple prayed in a standing position, not with hands folded in front of them but rather with hands uplifted. Not with eyes closed but open and not with heads bowed but raised up toward heaven. I suspect that that is precisely the posture in which the Pharisee prayed but not the publican. The publican had found a place over in a corner of the temple where he would be alone and where God would be the only listener to his prayer. His eyes were closed and his only gesture was to beat his chest in agony over the anguish of what he had to confess. His prayer was simple: "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

I have to tell you that the version of the Bible from which I read did not give a literal translation of the Greek text here. What he actually prayed was, "God, be merciful to me the sinner." He also made a comparison. If you were to ask him how he compared to the Pharisee he would have told you quickly that the Pharisee was the better man. He was the worst sinner of all. He had no hope, no righteousness, no good works — nothing but to come and

throw himself upon the mercy of God and say, “God, be merciful to me the sinner.”

Is his truth your truth? Against what backdrop do you measure your life? Do you compare yourself to the backdrop of God’s perfect righteousness?

In moments of humility when we consider ourselves to be worse than anyone else we go to God and say, “God, you are my only hope. My only chance is your mercy.” If that truth is overwhelming to you, then listen to what Jesus teaches us about God’s goodness: “I tell you, this man (the publican) went down to his house justified rather than the other.” I don’t think “justify” is a word that we use very commonly in our everyday language.

If you’re a typist or a typesetter you may refer to justifying the margin of the paper or the text, meaning that you make it come out even or just right. And in the same sense we might say that the publican left the temple that day made to be just like God in his goodness.

What a stunning irony! The Pharisee who thought he was so good was judged by Jesus to be a pathetic sinner and the publican who thought that he was so bad was justified by Jesus to be just as good as God. The difference of course was a matter of personal trust. The Pharisee trusted in himself and his own goodness and the publican had no trust in himself or his own goodness but threw himself completely upon the mercy and the goodness of God.

If we were to recast the parable in modern American terms we might imagine two men walking into a modern day restaurant. They are seated at opposite ends of the room. The first man strides in self-confidently, orders a large meal and when the waiter comes over to bring him his check he says, “By the way, I will be paying for this with my platinum American Express card.” And just in case the waiter doesn’t know, he explains that there are three levels of American Express card. The ordinary green one, the gold which is that much better and has more perks and then — for the elite few — the platinum card which requires the highest of income and has no limit in it’s credit. The waiter takes the card and goes back to the waiters’ stand to electronically scan the card for approval only to find out that the charge is rejected by American Express because the card has been canceled for lack of payment. Meanwhile the second man tells the waiter, “I have to tell you before I order that I have no

money at all and there is no way I can pay the bill. But I’m desperate and hungry. Will you feed me?” The waiter goes to the owner and explains both situations. The owner throws the first man out of the restaurant but goes over to the desperate man and shows mercy to him, telling him he can have anything he wants and there’ll be no charge.

Jesus isn’t concerned whether we are in a restaurant or a temple. He’s not concerned about who’s praying or who’s paying. He is concerned about our eternal destiny. In this parable he is saying that those who depend upon themselves are fools who are eternally lost, while those who depend upon him and his mercy are wise and destined to eternal life.

Who are you in the parable — Pharisee or publican, proud or humble, self-righteous or depending on God’s mercy? God wants to know.

As we bow our heads and pray privately, talking to God, knowing that no one else but God can hear, I invite you to tell him about yourself. Confess your sins. Forsake every self-righteousness. I invite you to say with the publican, “God, be merciful to me the sinner.”

Our Father, just as you heard the prayers in the temple long ago so you have heard our prayers. We may disguise ourselves and fool those around us but there’s no disguising ourselves or fooling you. For you know the intent of our heart. God, hear our prayers and may our prayers be like that of the publican, “God, be merciful to us the sinners.” For Jesus sake. Amen.

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