

A Key Parable

All the parables that Jesus told convey essential truths or principles necessary for discipleship. They illustrate or make real His didactic teachings so that we're unavoidably gripped by Jesus' words. Yet, there's one parable in Luke that's rather short that we absolutely must allow to transform us. (It may not have been a parable, but an actual episode that Jesus knew about, but we'll call it a parable.) This isn't theology. It's not some abstract teaching. It's for us; it's pointed straight at us. Luke, after all, is writing to believers. Jesus is aware of a key element in our lives that absolutely must be dealt with for entry into the Kingdom, for salvation. Let's look at Luke 18:9-14, the so-called Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. This lesson is in two parts: first I examine the parable itself and its meaning to us; then I discuss the larger and more important issue of why this, or anything that Jesus taught for that matter, is so critically important to us. So, **Part I**, the parable:

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness . . . " (v.9a). What an issue this is in our churches today!! Self-righteousness is deep and extensive. Yes, we profess to believe in Christ, but at the same time we know deep inside us that we're really not a bad person. In fact, we believe that we're actually a good person. "I pay my taxes, I keep my lawn mowed and shrubs trimmed, and my house inside is always neat and clean. I support our church, I attend church, I pray, and I read my Bible. God should be glad to have me; I know I'm going to be in heaven when I die." This is Phariseeism! It's pride. It's massive self-deception. And it's offensive to God. This parable is certainly for us. Yes, the parable involves two individuals who were prior to the cross, but that doesn't change its impact because Jesus taught it to His disciples who were to continue His ministry after the cross and Luke recorded it for us, who follow those Apostles, who follow Jesus. This is a discipleship issue.

"To some who . . . looked down on everybody else" (v. 9b). Are we aware of how much this hits home? It's an aspect of our innate sin nature that constantly seeks expression. We hold others in contempt. We are easily critical of others; it comes naturally to us. We do it all the time, every day. We're overweeningly proud. We love ourselves. We think we're the greatest, occasional failures notwithstanding. We keep in the foreground, always before us, the faults and failures of others.

"Two men went up to the Temple to pray. . . " (v.10). These two know that God exists and that it's at the Temple where He can be encountered. They both have a certain degree of knowledge about spiritual matters, as we do. They went there to pray. But their prayers reveal their own spiritual condition. It's our spiritual condition that's the point of this parable, indeed, of our relationship to God, that matters, not that we pray or even what we pray for. And this parable contrasts two opposing states. One is a Pharisee, a devout person who prided himself on keeping not only the Mosaic law, but also all the laws and rules that the rabbis had come up with to be sure they didn't break any part of the Mosaic law. He was bound to the traditions that had formed since the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. He wanted to be admired by the general populace, he wanted their praise for being so righteous. And for that, he was self-disciplined, committed to showing his belief in God; he was very religious. If anyone was going to be in heaven because of righteousness, he was it. I need to say this: he was like many of us today. There's Phariseeism in all of us. The tax collector, in contrast, was at the very bottom of the social scale. He was a disgustingly sinful person who was concerned about -- you guessed it! -- money. He probably cheated people. He probably knew something of the Mosaic law and the rabbinic teachings on righteousness but they didn't affect his life. He wasn't a religious person. How contemptuous we are of such persons! There's tax collector-ism in all of us too. Jesus is describing us. There are two kinds of "hearts" we can have, and only two. Jesus is teaching what Deuteronomy 30 had already stated as cosmic truth.

"The Pharisee stood up and prayed to himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men . . . " (v. 11a,b). Notice how astute Jesus is in framing this parable. He tells us that the Pharisee *stood* to pray, and that he prayed *to himself*. He was so self-confident of his state before God as if he were God's equal that he stood to pray. But his prayer was really only a fantasy; it was to himself, not to God at all. His heart wasn't inclined to God, but to himself. He was full of himself. This isn't just pride, it's narcissism, an extreme form of self-love. He is unable to love God, or even to think rightly about God because of his self-love. Needless to say, he has no fear of God. Instead, he seems to be using God in that he's taking what God in grace gave the Nation, the Law, to exalt himself. This type of person doesn't know God in the sense of being in a loving, intimately personal relationship. No, God was, to him, just a theological abstract; yes, God really existed, but that didn't mean much to him except someone to talk about in distant, abstract terms. He also surely was aware of an existence after death, but that had no effect on how he would pursue life.

". . . or even like this tax collector" (v. 11c). The Pharisee has so much self-love he isn't capable of loving others. So he expresses this snide, contemptuous remark about another fellow Israelite. A religiously arrogant snob, this proud

Pharisee sees himself as righteous, in a class set apart from and superior to all others. He's certain that God loves him and must be thrilled to have him as His holy representative on earth. Notice what his standard for righteousness is, it's other people; he's a better person than others are. If he knew the Law (as he should have), he'd have known that the standard is God's righteousness. And that's where he'd fail, so he switches to this lower standard to exalt himself. He's self deceived.

"I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (v. 12). Externals! Anyone can fast. Anyone can donate some of their money. He's trying to impress God with his piety. This person really doesn't get it! It's the heart God is interested in, and this man's heart is hard as stone. Besides, the commandment to love God is with *all* one's being, *all* one's resources. This man doesn't even come close by his own admission. He doesn't love God, he doesn't fear God, he doesn't even really know God. He wants to earn God's favor. He wants God to be indebted to him, obligated to take him into His presence and bless him. He'll never be grateful to God for anything. Trying to establish his own righteousness, which is never adequate, the Pharisee does worse, he ignores altogether his sin nature.

"But the tax collector . . ." (v.13). In profound contrast, this man is broken in spirit and filled with fear. He's too unworthy to even approach the inner court of the Temple. He's fully aware of his own sinfulness and therefore that he's an offense to a holy God, deserving of just condemnation. This man has a good grasp of reality; he understands well that he's a sinner, an incorrigible sinner, and there's nothing he can do about it but sin some more. He knows that only God is able to deliver him from its enslaving control. Also, he is painfully aware of his existence after death, and that has him gripped with fear. God's fierce indignation awaits. So he pleads only for mercy; he's guilty and he knows it. Surprisingly, he has greater knowledge of God than the super-religious Pharisee! Something else easy to miss: this man (implicitly) desires God, to be in His presence. Why else does he plead for mercy? This tax collector didn't know Romans 10:3, but we do (and you should read it now). God in grace imputes righteousness to those who love Him. Abraham received imputed righteousness. So will this humble, God-fearing, God-believing tax collector.

"I tell you . . ." (v.14). Jesus' comments on the parable contain three truths. First, justification is a gift that God grants to those who love Him. Second, God's ways are the reverse of what man thinks is how things should be. And the third is, God hates pride but esteems humility. A word or two about each: (1) Justification is a theological term meaning righteousness, which we don't have but must have to be in God's presence. We only can be justified by an act of God in grace, for otherwise no one ever could enjoy being with God and being blessed by God. But justification is based on our attitude toward God, and the tax collector's attitude was the right one. (2) God's ways are as transcendent as He is. That's why we must fill our minds with Scripture, God's revelation of Himself and His will. The Pharisee should have reflected long and hard on the lesson of the Hebrew Bible, which is that man on his own can't do it. We need to wait for the One the O.T. promises will come. Righteousness will be in Him. Jesus is that One. (3) The problem with pride is, it denies our creaturely-ness, which really means we deny reality and choose delusion instead. Humility acknowledges our creaturely-ness, that God is sovereign and wise and our role is to be in submission to Him and His will.

Dear reader, be careful how you read your Bible. We need to read it carefully, meditate on what we read, and then think long and hard how what we read applies to us. So this parable should cause us to probe deeply into our hearts and minds to see what we're like, whether good or not. That's because there are only these two options: We're either like the Pharisee or like the tax collector. The issue is grave, because the Pharisee didn't gain the salvation that's on offer in the Gospel. If you discover Phariseeism in your life, deal with it! I'm sure Jesus told the parable in the expectation readers would want to transform their lives so as to be all that God desires.

Now, **Part II**, the larger issue: "Doesn't grace, doesn't belief in Jesus, doesn't the Gospel promise of forgiveness of sins and being in heaven when I die mean that everything else in the New Testament, including discipleship, is irrelevant? After all, if I have the assurance of being in heaven, what difference does it make if I'm like the Pharisee or the tax collector? God loves me. Why should I fear Him? God loves me as I am. Why should I be any different?" The short answer is, Scripture makes no direct, explicit statement to answer this, but there's a mass of biblical and theological data to inform us what the correct answer must be. Only someone who is sound asleep or who is foolish would ignore the overwhelming and compelling biblical evidence that, while God lovingly grants us great privileges, God is also makes heavy demands of us and we're responsible to Him. We need to discuss this. A lot is at stake.

On the Bible's opening pages are truths that are meant to guide all existence. We were created for two clear reasons: to enjoy fellowship with the living eternal God, and to serve Him as He intends for us to serve Him. The ultimate goal was that God would be glorified. Our choice to dishonor God by disobeying Him and the entrance of sin didn't change God's

creational intent. All thru the Bible's long over-arching story, God continues to reach out to human creatures to enter into relationship with Himself, and to serve Him. But a sin nature necessitates two additional demands: for a relationship, there has to be holiness instead of a continued expression of sin, and to serve God there has to be obedience. Thus Israel was delivered from Egypt not to enjoy life in a good land according to their personal desires and pleasures, but to fulfill God's great purposes of fellowship and servant-hood. So a Law was provided to make it possible for a holy God to dwell in the midst of His beloved people; and obedience was commanded -- something they owed Him anyway. The Book of Exodus spends almost a dozen detailed chapters on the Tabernacle. Why? Because that's the place where God was going to reside among His people. The place had to be holy, and the people had to be holy. Christianity continues the same creational intent, except that *we* are the tabernacle. A holy God takes up residence in us, so we have to be holy. And the indwelling Spirit of God motivates us to obedient servant-hood to fulfill God's great purposes. By His atoning sacrifice, Jesus purifies our hearts making fellowship with God possible, but we have to want it and we have to maintain it. And if we're overflowing with gratitude for the exalted relationship God makes available to us, we'll obediently serve Him as He instructed. A relationship is mutual or it doesn't occur. If we're not obedient to the responsibilities and instructions extended to us, we must not have wanted the relationship that's on offer in the Gospel.

Jesus is our representative and model. He's the second Adam, the ideal human. And God loves the Son. So we're to imitate Him, be like Him, in order to be pleasing to God. The Son enjoyed intimate personal fellowship with the Father, and He obeyed God's will at great personal sacrifice. And so He served God as intended. We're to do the same. Believing in Jesus is the entry point into a new and radical life of knowing, loving, obeying and serving God, personal sacrifice notwithstanding. That's why transforming discipleship and sanctification are not merely essential (they are that), but the very reason for salvation. A life-long, loving commitment to Jesus, to His teachings, and to His will is what Christianity is. In this way we enjoy eternal communion with God and fulfill His great purposes in creation.

The evangelical churches in America are in crisis. The problem, as I see it, is we've created in modern America a pop-Christianity that's really just a bunch of slogans that, tragically, keeps us superficial and immature. The Pharisees thought that they knew truth, but they didn't. We don't know our Bible as we ought either, so we don't even realize that there's a gaping disconnect between what we think Christianity is and what's actually in Scripture. We need to reflect deeply on, for example, Matthew 7:21-23, Revelation chapters 2 and 3, Ephesians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, and Romans 1:5 and 16:26, all of which demand of us a loving relationship with Jesus and its concomitant holiness and obedience.

Let's conclude. This parable, understood as Jesus intended it, should drive us to our knees. The Pharisees excluded themselves from God's special, saving grace by their mad self-love. And if all that Jesus means to us today is He makes heaven available to us when we die, we're not any different. We're simply using Him for our own selfish ends. There's no surprise that we do this, because we're controlled by a sin nature that detests God and His will. So we need to identify with the tax collector and humbly plead for the Holy Spirit to help us be delivered from the power of sin. If we love God, we'll do that. And if we love God we'll strive with all our being to be holy so that God can use us for His glory.