

Luke 18:9-14, The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

In business, the super successful like Donald Trump are full of confidence and pride in their achievements. In professional athletics it would seem over confidence is a prerequisite. The unwashed masses loved Mohammed Ali, the boxer, for his constant "I am the greatest!" boasts. I once read a book entitled THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM by Chris Lasch describing our current society, "We live for the moment...to live for yourself, to view everything only as it applies to you." Self absorption is the climate of our society. Values are determined by such ideas as "loving yourself is the greatest love of all". People are typically thinking they need to feel good about themselves, and they constantly are rationalizing selfish behavior by saying "I owe it to myself." New Age philosophers tell us we can find "God within you" or "You can discover your inner divinity". Psychologists and even preachers today tell us our problem is not sin, but a loss of self esteem. I am not down grading self esteem, but God's way of giving value, meaning, and purpose is totally different than the world's way. True meaning and purpose come to us only when life is God centered and not self centered. One noted Christian Psychologist concludes that the most common error in people's self image is not low self esteem, but rather self serving pride; not an inferiority complex but a superiority complex. In fact, from one degree to another, we are all characterized by pride, selfishness, and an attitude of self importance.

Spiritually, the human race tends to be just as over confident in their moral/ethical view of themselves and most "professing" Christians are confident in their goodness. Polls show that over half of professing Christians believe they will go to heaven based on their own obedience and good works. I remember that after Mother Theresa died, a poll showed that 70% of Americans believed that she was in heaven. Amazingly the next question was do you believe you will go to heaven, and 85% said yes. I would like to talk to that 15% that thinks they are better than Theresa, but it just reveals the religious over confidence that people have. Scripture reveals that such confidence is a dangerous delusion. This optimism about our goodness assigns to mankind nothing less than the task of being its own savior and redeemer. The problem is that the "self" has been placed on the throne where only God belongs. In the parable that Jesus taught in Luke 18:9-14, the villain is deeply religious, hard working, committed to upright behavior and good works. Naturally we wonder how Jesus could possibly criticize that, but He reveals that our assumptions about our goodness are opposed to the true nature of man and opposed to the grace of God.

Luke 18:9-14



Dispute of Jesus and the Pharisees over tribute money (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

The context of this parable is found in Luke 18:1-8 where Jesus teaches His disciples about prayer. He taught them to be persistent, bold, sincere, and faithful in their praying. Now in the follow-up parable beginning in v.9, Jesus will contrast two distinctly different prayers of two different people. Each prayer reveals the true convictions of the person praying. The Pharisee's prayer is all about himself, reveals his pride, and his assumption of his salvation by his good works. The Pharisee has assigned to himself the task of being his own savior and redeemer. In contrast, the publican's prayer is humble, contrite with an admission of sin, repentant, and his assumption is that he can only be saved by God's mercy and grace. In this contrast, Jesus will confirm that all claims of personal self righteousness will be rejected by God. Entry into heaven is strictly on the basis of divine grace received by our faith.

The devout, pious, respected keepers of the religious Law in Jesus' day were the Pharisees. The great historian Josephus wrote that they were "a body of Jews known for surpassing the others in the observance of piety and exact interpretation of the religious laws." Amazingly, Jesus constantly "buted heads" with these religious leaders all through the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 16:14 we learn that they were "lovers of money", and in Luke 16:15 Jesus ripped them up by saying, "You justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed by men is detestable in the sight of God." Jesus was saying that the Pharisees make a great show of their religion, but their hearts were self absorbed and their real God was materialism. People fall for this religious stuff, but God knows their hearts, and as we know, God judges totally different than mankind. Therefore, when Jesus taught the parable contrasting true faith in God with the religious hypocrisy of men—the Pharisees were the perfect negative example. This parable in Luke 18:9 also points out that historically the religious community puts their faith in moral and religious accomplishments, and the inmates take over the insane asylum. For instance, in our culture, if someone commits adultery they may be thrown out of the church, but if they acquire millions through white collar crime, they make them a Deacon.

In Jesus' parables, He would typically make His points more dramatic by using extreme unexpected contrasts. This made a tax collector the perfect counterpart to the Pharisee. The tax collectors were the scum of Jewish society. They were typically empowered by Rome to not only collect taxes for the hated foreign power, but they also could extort extra sums for themselves. They were considered traitors and criminals by all Jews. Therefore to read the parable in Luke 18 properly, we must look through Jewish eyes which would have a positive

expectation for the Pharisee and a very negative expectation for the crooked tax collector. In Luke 18:9, we are introduced to the parable by the author telling us that Jesus told the parable about certain ones (Pharisees) who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. This is a nice way to say that they were self righteous hypocrites. The other side of self righteousness is a tendency to “view others with contempt”. The two men went up to the Temple to pray in verse 10. Official daily prayers were said in the Temple twice a day. Jesus’ audience assumed that the Pharisee would be there, but was shocked that the scumbag tax gatherer was there.

Portrait of a Religious Performer

The Pharisee was praying, but the author lets us in on an inside secret that only God knows—the Pharisee was actually praying to himself. Even though he thanks God, the fact is his prayer is all about himself, and about him justifying himself. You could call it an “I” prayer because there are five uses of the personal pronoun. The Pharisee’s prayer was a self congratulatory address to himself disguised as a prayer. The indication is that the prayers are said out loud so everyone in the Temple can hear, and thus his hypocrisy is multiplied. We are made all the more uncomfortable when the Pharisee drags in the poor tax collector to prove his own self righteousness by pointing out the immorality of others. The Pharisee does not care about the needs of the tax collector which shows that he is a lover of self and has no love for others. This is further evidence that the self righteous set themselves up as God in judging themselves righteous and condemning others. I think Jesus was revealing that the self righteous are deluded that all is well in their lives, and that they believe those morally inferior cannot be saved. Notice that in verse 12 the emphasis of the Pharisee’s moral superiority is on his external actions represented by regular out spoken prayer, fasting, and tithing. If we examine these external activities we will find that the Pharisee wasn’t really praying to God, he was congratulating himself. Fasting was not actually part of the Law of Moses except once a year on the Day of Atonement, but the super religious had made this part of their show of looking religious by fasting twice a week. Jesus revealed in Matthew 6:2,16 that they were tithing and fasting for all the wrong reasons—“that they may be honored by men” instead of God.

In Luke 18:13, we read the shocking contrast of the tax gatherer’s prayer. Jesus’ audience would not even expect this man to be in the Temple, much less making an acceptable prayer to God. In his humility, he stood some distance away from all the holy rollers. The Pharisees position in the Temple and his posture in prayer was proud and self confident, but this known sinner was downcast, beating his breast in remorse, grief, and contrition. His address to God

is the only appropriate address of a sinner to God, "God be merciful to me, the sinner!" This was not a sign of the man's poor self image or a depressed view of his value, but an accurate description of his spiritual situation. He correctly assessed his need for reconciliation with God as only achievable by God's mercy and grace. I think even this tax collector could have easily found a multitude of people he could have compared himself to as being better than them, but while the Pharisee compares himself to others, the tax collector measures himself in relation to God. God does not grade on the curve, but we must live up to God's standard and not man's.

Justified by God

In Luke 18:14, Jesus completed the sharp contrast between the two men who were praying in the Temple. The Jews in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus were no doubt shocked by Jesus' verdict that the tax collector left justified in God's eyes, and the Pharisee was not justified in God's eyes. What was the difference? Jesus completes the contrast by revealing that in God's judgment "everyone who exalts himself (before God) shall be humbled (by God), but he who humbles himself shall be exalted (by God). Put simply, the contrite sinner realizes he has no claim upon righteousness apart from Christ, and he makes no rationalizations, comparisons, or excuses. He only asks for forgiveness and mercy that only God can give. The proud person who stands before God claiming justification by his own virtue will be humbled by God.

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