

Stories Jesus Told

The Danger of Comparative Righteousness

Luke 18:9
February 06, 2021

The Context:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told a story:

The Parable {Luke 18:10-14}:

"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. ¹² 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."

The Lesson:

The crowd would have been shocked.... Wait, what?! The Tax-Collector and **NOT** the Pharisee went home justified?

Justification: God removes our guilt and the penalty of sin and declares us righteous {as though we have never sinned} – we receive and accept this through faith in Jesus.

To understand the shock, we have to understand the position each man held in Jewish Society ---

The Pharisee:

Pharisees were highly regarded spiritual leaders and valued members of Jewish society. They built synagogues, taught Scripture and sought to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity. They strongly resisted the secular influence of Greek and Roman culture.

The 1st Century historian, Josephus, says, *"The cities give great attestations to (the Pharisees), on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives, and their discourses also."* --- Josephus Antiquities Book 18, Chapter 1, Paragraph 3

The same community that valued Pharisees, **HATED** Tax-Collectors.

The Tax-Collector:

Tax-Collectors were Jews, so by default, they were seen as traitors because they worked for the **HATED** Romans, but they were worse than traitors because they were also corrupt.

We learned from the story of Jesus and **Zacchaeus** that Tax-Collectors paid a fixed sum for the right to collect taxes and anything above and beyond that was profit. These men became wealthy at the expense of their countrymen, so they were rejected socially and treated as the lowest class of sinners by the religious establishment {**Rabbis debated whether it was possible for them to experience true repentance**}

So again, how is it that a lying, cheating traitor was JUSTIFIED before God and NOT a pious Pharisee?

Let's look more closely at their respective prayers:

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. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of my income."

The Pharisee is not so much talking to God as he is talking to himself. He is recounting, for all those close enough to hear, how exceptionally righteous he is. The basis of this "*righteousness*" is the fact that he is not like the general riff-raff of society and he does "*churchy*" things.

This is an example of comparative righteousness --- comparing our righteousness to someone else's righteousness and, in this case, congratulating ourselves because our "*righteousness*" is better.

Thank GOD I'm not like them those people {fill in the blank}. And please take note of all the excellent "religious things" I do!!!

Here's the problem from God's point of view:

- **Psalm 14:1-3 {Ps. 53:1-3}** - The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is **no one** who does good. ² The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. ³ **All** have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is **no one** who does good, **not even one**.
- **Ecclesiastes 7:20** - There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.
- **Romans 3:9-17** - What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! **We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.** ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is **no one** righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is **no one** who understands, **no one** who seeks God. ¹² **All** have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is **no one** who does good, **not even one.**" "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know."

The verdict: The Pharisee is lying to himself and to everyone listening because he is not what believes himself to be.

Comparative righteousness forgets that God doesn't compare us to each other, He compares us to Himself:

God ---

- **Psalm 11:7** - For the LORD is **righteous**....
- **Psalm 97:2** - Clouds and thick darkness surround him; **righteousness** and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- **Jeremiah 9:23-24** - This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and **righteousness** on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD.
- **Jeremiah 33:16** - In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our **Righteousness**.

Humanity ---

- **Isaiah 64:6** - All of us have become like one who is unclean, and **all our righteous acts are like filthy rags**; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

By that standard – God's Righteousness vs. human righteousness "*filthy rags*" – WE ARE ALL IN TROUBLE.

The problem with the Pharisee was not that he did good things... but that he was bad at humility. He was off the charts when it came to spiritual pride. He believed that all the things he did or didn't do earned him the right to eternity. However, this is not a works issue.... This is a heart issue and of all the things God hates, pride ranks right up there at the top of the list:

- **Proverbs 6:16-19** - There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: Haughty eyes (pride), a lying tongue, hands that kill the innocent, a heart that plots evil, feet that race to do wrong, a false witness who pours out lies, a person who sows discord in a family.

Why does pride garner such a divine reaction? Because pride is a barrier to God's working in a person's life. God cannot help the person who does not believe they need help. This is the position in which we find the Pharisee. He felt no conviction of sin and believed that he was fine on his own – He didn't need God. However, Salvation is not found in self- righteousness. Salvation is found in Jesus alone, but the Pharisee, content with his own version of righteousness, left the Temple in the same condition in which he arrived --- utterly lost.

The Tax-Collector, this Roman-loving, money grubbing, tax collector, has come to the Temple as well. He found an out of the way place and as he kept his eyes firmly pointed to the ground, his emotions got the better of him and he began to pray: "**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**"

Actually, we need to correct the English translation a bit. In Greek He doesn't call himself a sinner ... he calls himself **THE SINNER**.

No comparisons.

No excuses.

No justifying of his actions.

Just an admission of his guilt before God ---- I am **THE** sinner.

Here is a man completely broken. He knew who he was and he knew there was only one place to find mercy and forgiveness.

When the Tax-Collector left the Temple that day, he did not depart in the same condition in which he arrived. He departed forgiven and declared righteous.

Two men. Two Prayers. Two Outcomes.

- **Ellen White {COL 154-158}**: The Pharisee and the publican represent two great classes into which those who come to worship God are divided.

Self-righteous

Deep sense of need and un-worthiness

There is nothing so offensive to God or so dangerous to the human soul as pride and self-sufficiency. Of all sins it is the most hopeless, the most incurable.

The Pharisee felt no conviction of sin. The Holy Spirit could not work with him. His soul was encased in a self-righteous armor which the arrows of God, barbed and true-aimed by angel hands, failed to penetrate. It is only he who knows himself to be a sinner that Christ can save. We must know our real condition, or we shall not feel our need of Christ's help. We must understand our danger, or we shall not flee to the refuge. We must feel the pain of our wounds, or we should not desire healing.

In one way only can a true knowledge of self be obtained. We must behold Christ. It is ignorance of Him that makes men so uplifted in their own righteousness. When we contemplate His purity and excellence, we shall see our own weakness and poverty and defects as they really are. We shall see ourselves lost and hopeless, clad in garments of self-righteousness, like every other sinner. We shall see that if we are ever saved, it will not be through our own goodness, but through God's infinite grace.