



To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone 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 by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—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 all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:9–17).

When I was a boy, I loved the Olympics. It didn't matter whether it was the Winter or Summer games, I ate it all up. One of the reasons I liked the Olympics so much was I had a clear sense of who the bad guys and good guys were. I grew up during the Cold War so the good guys were the Americans and our allies, and the bad guys were from the Soviet Union and their friends in the Eastern block countries. The good guys wore red, white and blue and the bad guys just wore red. The good guys had names like mine; the bad guys had names like Nabatov and Chekowski.

As I grew older, though, things changed in the world. The Soviet Union and the Eastern block collapsed. Some of their athletes came over here. I even had a couple of opportunities to go to Russia and get to know some of those people for myself. I found my assumptions about them didn't align with real people living in a real world. Instead, they dealt with caricatures rather than real characters. I still love the Olympics, but I find it much more difficult to separate the good guys from the bad guys.

Sometimes I think we do the same thing with the Bible. We think, for example, that had we been there for the match in Egypt between Pharaoh and Moses, Pharaoh would have been dressed in

red and Moses in red, white and blue. We can do the same things with some of the stories Jesus told. We've heard them too many times. As a result, like I did with the Olympics, we've concluded that Jesus dealt with caricatures rather than real characters.

We Must Confront Our Basic Assumptions about this Story

Take this story in Luke 18. As soon as we hear of the cast of characters, we've made up our minds. We've read the Bible enough to know the Pharisees are the bad guys and the tax collectors are the good guys. Most of us know the Pharisees were a group of people who took their religion quite seriously, but who were very antagonistic towards Jesus. We imagine this pompous Pharisee always running on and on about his own superior spirituality. He's really rotten to the core. All of his religious activity is just an act; he doesn't really care about God. His whole life is a sham. So we dismiss him.

At the same time, we're probably in the habit of viewing the tax collector as kind of the humble, downtrodden type. We know the tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews because they collected taxes for the Romans and were considered traitors. But we tend to see them as victims of other people's injustice; their questionable behavior being the result of a corrupt system. We imagine that deep down this guy really wants to know God, he just doesn't know how. And we assume that when he left the temple that day, he immediately resigned from his job as a tax collector, joined the First Baptist Church, and began to pay back everyone he'd ever ripped off.

With these assumptions in place it's no wonder that we hardly lift an eyebrow at Jesus' verdict in v. 14. Of course the Pharisee is rejected and the tax collector is the righteous one! But this isn't how Jesus's hearers would have reacted to this story. If we read it this way we miss the point. With these stereotypes we can inoculate ourselves from the impact of this parable. It's too easy for us to identify ourselves with the tax collector and dismiss the Pharisee.

We're more like the Pharisees than we think. They were a respected, sincere group of laymen who truly desired to serve God. They took the Bible seriously. They felt that morality was being compromised and wanted a return to traditional values. The tax collectors were the opposite. They were usually very wealthy and had come upon their money by ripping off the most helpless members of Jewish society. Robert Capon describes this tax

collector as “a fat cat who drives a stretch limo, drinks nothing but Chivas Regal, and never shows up at a party without at least two \$500 a night call girls in tow.” I hope you can see here why Jesus’ verdict really is shocking.

You see, even for us, as believers, the line between the good guys and the bad guys isn’t always as clear as we think. We may ask, “Where then **is** the line drawn? What’s the real difference between these two men?” That’s an important question because I’d say every one of us stands with one of these two men. Let’s look closer at this story to see the answer.

The Difference Between These Two was Humility and Pride

In v. 10 we see they both went up to the temple to pray. This was a way of saying that they went to church. They were most likely engaging in the worship that took place at 9:00 am and 3:00 pm in the temple. It was during these times Jews gathered and sacrifices were made for their sins. It was also during this service that incense was burned and time was given for personal prayer.

First, we see the prayer of the Pharisee. Notice his actions. He stood. Most likely, he had his eyes lifted up as this was the proper way to pray back then. He knew how to pray properly. Notice also he stood off by himself. Some versions say he prayed “to himself” while others say he prayed “about himself.” I believe that the text should read that he prayed “by himself.” The word “Pharisee” comes from a word that means “to separate.” A Pharisee would want to stay away from the others who might be “unclean” because if he even touched their clothes or accidentally brushed against one of them he would become unclean. So from his body language we can see this man wanted to do things right.

His words reflect that too. He starts with thanksgiving. When you pray, that’s a good place to start. We’re called to express our gratitude to God. His thanks to God is rooted in the fact that he’s not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers. Then he finds someone near him there in the temple who fits that description. He knew tax collectors were scoundrels. How thankful he was God had allowed him to be different. It’s like when we see a bum on the street and say, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

He describes himself to God. By the time he’s done, he’ll have used the first person singular pronoun “I” five times, making himself the main subject of his prayer. It’s like he feeds on his own virtues. He fasts twice a week and pays tithes of all he gets. In doing this, he goes above and beyond the law. The law said a man only had to fast once a year. But, like most Pharisees, he fasted twice a week. This man took his relationship with God very seriously! He was willing to be inconvenienced by it. This was also true in regard to his checkbook. He didn’t just tithe from

his wine, oil, and grain like the law required, he tithed from everything, even the herbs he grew in his garden. Unlike the tax collector who ripped people off, the Pharisee was generous with what he had. His wasn’t a religion of convenience; he put his money where his mouth was. He was disciplined in both his prayer life and his tithing.

When you really think about it, he looks like the kind of person every church would love to have in leadership. He attends church regularly. He knows his Bible. He practices spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting. He tithes regularly and even goes beyond that.

The tax collector is quite different. It says he “stood at a distance.” He doesn’t feel worthy to stand at the altar with God’s people. Then he beats his breast. This was a gesture used back then in times of extreme anguish. The remarkable thing about this is that it was more customary for women to do this than it was for men. This wasn’t the proper way for a man to pray! But he’s so desperate that he doesn’t seem to care.

Then notice his words. He says, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” His prayer is quite a bit shorter than that of the Pharisee. He doesn’t offer thanks. Instead, he issues a desperate request. He asks for mercy based on the fact that he’s such a sinner. It appears he saw himself in a class by himself in this. He calls himself, “**the** sinner.” He feels no one else could have done as much wrong as he. He doesn’t go on and on about it. He doesn’t wallow in it, but he asks for mercy. In asking for mercy, he uses a word here that means “to cover.” It has the sense of being appeased. It was a word often used in connection with the atoning sacrifices made in the temple. He assumes he can’t earn forgiveness; all he can do is beg God to cover his sin based on the sacrifices being made in the temple. That was his only hope. He doesn’t even make an offer of restitution, which most Jews would have seen as a sign of sincerity. He casts himself entirely on the mercy of God.

The two men walk out and that’s the end of the story. But then Jesus delivers his shocking verdict. He says, “*This man (the tax collector) rather than the other (the Pharisee) went home justified before God.*” This man is now in right relation to God rather than the other! In other words, he’s going to heaven and the other is not. The Pharisee, though he thought he was righteous, was unrighteous, while the tax collector, though he thought he broke all the records for sin, was righteous. The line between the good guys and the bad guys wasn’t drawn where we thought.

So where was this line drawn? Why is one right with God and the other not? Whatever it was that separated these two men, it wasn’t a desire to be in touch with God. They both went up to the temple to pray. Nor is it an issue of praying correctly. From what we can tell, the Pharisee did everything right, he even gave thanks, yet he still walked away unrighteous. Nor is it drawn between those who do good works and those who don’t. The

Pharisee was all about good works, but he still walked away unrighteous.

So where is it drawn? Most of us have a pretty good idea. We read this story and what offends us is this Pharisee is so conceited. If you and I were going to give him a bit of spiritual counsel, we'd tell him to be more modest. We'd say to him, "Look, what you pray may be true, but you shouldn't pray it in public, and you shouldn't put another man down like that. It sounds so conceited." We don't like conceited people. We like our heroes modest, and conceit has a way of putting us off. If you and I play ping pong and I beat you in three straight games and then say, "Don't feel bad. You just lost to the greatest ping pong player in the world," you wouldn't like that. You may be willing to admit I'm a better ping pong player than you are, but you don't want me to rub your face in it. Conceit rubs all of us the wrong way.

But conceit isn't the problem with this Pharisee. Conceit is a minor matter. It's often just bad judgment. It's often a way of covering up feelings of inadequacy. As far as God is concerned, conceit is a lot like acne, disturbing but not fatal. The trouble with this Pharisee wasn't conceit, not pimples on the skin. It was deeper; it was in his bloodstream. The problem with the Pharisee was pride.

In v. 9 Jesus told this parable to those who were "confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." One of the symptoms of pride is a critical spirit, because one of the ways we feed our pride is by comparing ourselves with others. We usually look at their vices and think of our virtues, and that, we assume, gives us special standing with God. We have a way of cutting other people off at the knees and putting ourselves up on stilts. In comparison, we seem to stand tall. We may thank God for that, but deep down we feel we've earned it.

We can hear the echo of the Pharisee's prayer in many of our own prayers.

"I thank you, Lord, that I'm not like those people who can't seem to get it together to make it to church more than twice a month."

"I thank you, Lord, that I'm not like those people who are so mired in credit card debt they can't even give 10% of their income to the church."

"I thank you, Lord, that I am not like those people who compromised sexually before marriage."

"Thank you, Lord, that I am not like my neighbor who never mows his lawn and drinks too much."

This Pharisee thought the distinctions that mattered among men mattered with God. But the tax collector wasn't thinking about others. In desperation, he just cried out for mercy. The heart of true prayer is this humble cry of desperation. There's a time and place for us to develop the discipline of prayer and to become

comfortable and confident when we pray. But what's most fundamental is the cry of the heart to get help from the only one who can meet our deepest need. Desperation is the primary condition for true prayer. The reason we don't pray more isn't because we don't know how to pray but because we don't really need to pray. We're not humble enough to know how desperate we really are.

It's interesting Luke places the story about babies following this parable. Why is it you have to become like a baby to enter the kingdom? Babies are desperately dependent. They can't earn anything. You don't get into the Kingdom the way you get into a country club; you don't get in by showing your credentials; you get in because you know your need, and in your need you cry out to God.

We have to be careful with this. Humility is a very slippery thing! I can't tell you how many times I've come to God out of desperation, began pouring my heart out to him, and then all of a sudden become very conscious of how humble I was and how God must really be impressed with this prayer! As soon as we **think** we're humble, as soon as we become conscious of it, our humility becomes pride.

It's also possible to fall into the very same trap of the Pharisee, only in a reverse sort of way. This is the pride which comes before God and says, "Lord, I thank you that I'm not proud like this Pharisee! Thank you that I know how great a sinner I am. Thank you that I'm not a hypocrite." But this tax collector wasn't boasting about his humility. He simply stood in the presence of God realizing how desperate he was for mercy.

You see, the key to his humility was where he looked. The Pharisee looked "down" while the tax collector looked "up." The Pharisee measured himself by a standard lower than himself—the tax collector. And when he measured himself by that standard he came out looking good. We can always find someone worse than ourselves and use that as a means of justifying ourselves. "I'm not that bad, look at so and so." We all love to compare. I can look at people who make more money than I do and judge them as materialistic; I can look at people who make less than I do and judge them as lazy. A person fatter than me has no self-discipline; a person thinner than me is vain and egotistical. I do all this naturally and easily in my head virtually every day of my life, and so do you. We love to pass judgment on people, and this tendency gets worse instead of better when we take spiritual matters seriously. There are always people who are worse than we are, and what a comfort they are to our hearts!

But the tax collector didn't look down at others, he looked up. He looked at God and measured himself by that perfect standard, seeing how far removed he was. The same thing would have happened if the Pharisee had looked up. His religious discipline and obedient lifestyle would have seemed a small thing to him

compared to the corruption in his heart. He would have been aware of desires and jealousies that infected all he did.

The line dividing the righteous and the unrighteous is drawn between the truly humble and the proud. Jesus concludes, *“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* The tax collector had a humble heart. He was exalted by God. The Pharisee had a proud heart, and he would be humbled. The key to this is our point of reference when we approach God. If we look down and compare ourselves with men we'll surely end up proud, but if we keep looking up at God, measuring ourselves by his standard of righteousness, we'll stay desperately humble, and we won't even know it.

One of the benefits of living in God's presence is this: when you really see God, you see yourself; when you see yourself, you see your sin; when you see your sin, you cry out to God for mercy. The saint is always more aware of his need of God than his successes in God, always more aware of how far he has to go than how far he has come. If you live in the presence of God and live in the light of his holiness, you'll see your sin. And when you see your sin, you see your need of forgiveness, and you cry out to God for mercy, and you'll receive it. You'll receive it because there is One who died in your place. Atonement has been made. It's through the cross that our sin is covered. It's through the cross that we're made right with God. This is the doctrine of justification by faith the apostle Paul would unpack later in his letters. Paul wrote, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith”* (Rom. 3:23-25). Jesus didn't come to save so-called righteous people; he came to save those who know how short they fall, casting themselves on the mercy of God and trusting in his shed blood.

You never outgrow your need mercy. The most respected pastor, who has lived with God for scores of years, needs God's grace just as much as the pimp or prostitute on skid row who comes to Jesus Christ for the first time. The more you know of God's light,

the more you see your own darkness. And the more you become aware of your need of God's grace, the more you realize how much God gives you.

Years ago in the *New Yorker*, H.G. Wells told a story about a minister. He was the kind of man who always said spiritual things to people. When troubled folks came to him, he found that a particularly helpful thing to say, if said in a right tone of voice, was, “Have you prayed about it?” If said in just the right way, it seemed to settle things.

The minister himself didn't pray much; he had life wrapped up in a neat package. But one day his life collapsed, and it occurred to him that he should take some of his own advice. So, one Saturday afternoon he entered the church, went to the front, and knelt down. Then he folded his hands before the altar and he began to pray. He said, “O God,” and suddenly there was a voice. It was crisp, businesslike. The voice said, “Well, what is it?”

The next day when the worshipers came to church, they found the minister sprawled face down on the carpet. When they turned him over, they discovered he was dead. Lines of horror were etched upon his face. People have wondered what H.G. Wells was trying to say. What he was saying is simply this: there are folks who talk a lot about God who would be scared to death if they saw him face to face.

Yet that's where we're called to live. That's the secret of humility—not looking inward at your deficiencies or weaknesses, not looking outward at other people, comparing yourself with them, their vices against your virtues, their virtues against your vices. Humility comes from looking up into the face of God—who is both holy and loving—to see ourselves and our need of forgiveness, to cry out for mercy for daily life. Seeing God is to see ourselves. And to see ourselves is to understand what humility is.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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