TWO MEN WENT UP to the TEMPLE to PRAY

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"Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: 'Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a pharisee and the other a tax collector. The pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise 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 and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke 18:9-14

Persistent Prayer

The Lord had been teaching His disciples about prayer in the first eight verses of Luke 18. In the parable of the persistent widow, He taught of a helpless person with nothing but right on her side. She desired justice and her persistent prayers to God and pressure against the unrighteous judge, brought about justice in the end. The Lord encouraged His people to be bold, confident and persistent in their prayers.

A Warning Against Arrogance and Presumption

However, in this parable of the pharisee and the Tax collector, the Lord warns against a boldness which is arrogant and a confidence that is presumption. The Scripture explains that the Lord told this parable to *"some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others."*

The Pharisees

Because of the Bible, the term pharisee has become a derogatory term, synonymous with *'religious hypocrite'*. However, that was not its implication in first century Judea. The pharisees represented the pinnacle of religious and social respectability. They were highly respected as the most upright and accomplished people in first century society.

Pious Pretence

When this religious leader came to the Temple to pray, he was coming to his favourite place, to do his favourite activity. He was very comfortable in the Temple. He stood to pray and he prayed aloud. But in this parable, the Lord explodes the pretence. This man was praying with himself, declares the Lord.

Self-Centred

Prayer is meant to be God-centred, but here is a person who prays about himself and to himself. His prayer lacks any expression of praise, thanksgiving, or worship to Almighty God. This pharisee offers only a self-centred, self-absorbed, self-obsessed, litany of self-congratulation.

Lack of Fear of God

The pharisee displays no understanding of being in the awesome presence of a Holy God, the Creator and Eternal Judge of all. He is not brought to his knees like Isaiah, who saw the Lord and was immediately convicted that he was a sinful man who dwelt amongst a people of unclean lips. This pharisee did not fall on his face, as a dead man, like the Apostle John when he met the Risen Christ, to receive the Revelation. No, this man stands and looks up confidently towards Heaven and recites the reasons why he is so impressed with himself, comparing himself with extortioners, the unjust, adulterers and tax collectors!

Fasting
The only fast prescribed in the Law of Moses was on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:27), although voluntary fasting could accompany prayer (Psalm 35:13), repentance (1 Kings 21:27) and mourning (2 Samuel 1:12). However, by the time of Christ, Jewish religious tradition had increased the number of fasts expected of the pious. The Scriptures teach that fasting can be a useful religious exercise, but our Lord Jesus roundly condemned the practise when it was seen as a way of meriting God's favour, or when it became an ostentatious display (Matthew 6:16-18; Isaiah 58:1-6).There are even those who boast and broadcast their exploits in fasting!

Exceeding Requirements
The Pharisees' religious order required their adherents to fast once a week, but this man fasted twice a week. The Old Testament imposed a tithe on one's income, however this man paid a tithe on everything he acquired, amounting to almost a double tithe. He was a man who not only did good and religious things, but he did them in a way that far exceeded the most stringent requirements. He was an upright religious leader convinced of his own religiosity and superiority.

Self-Congratulation
Our Lord's portrayal of this pharisee is no caricature. The Jewish Talmud records a prayer from this time: *"I thank you, O Lord my God, that You have given my lot with those who sit in the house of Torah and not with those who sit in the street corners, for they are early to work and I am early to work; I am early to work on the words of Torah and they are early to work of things of no importance. I weary myself and they weary themselves; I weary myself and profit thereby, they weary themselves to no profit. I run and they run; I run to the life of the age to come, they run to the pit of destruction."* These kind of prayers are more exercises in self-congratulation than worshipping, honouring and thanking Almighty God for His grace and mercy!

The Greatest Fault
This leader had an inflated sense of self. He was proud and self-centred, blind to the reality of his position before a righteous and Holy God. **The greatest fault is to be aware of no faults.**

I-dolatry
The Pharisees' prayer focused on what he **did**, not on what he **was**. He highlighted his **conduct,** not his **character**. He was focused on himself, not on God. Such people are not worshipping God, but worshipping themselves. This is **I-**dolatry. This prayer lacked praise, confession, thanksgiving and petition. Such prayers are not being prayed in God's presence, in awe of the Divine Majesty. Such prayers are of people impressed by their own superiority and seeking to impress other people.

Superficial
To such people, style is more important than substance. Appearance more important than reality. One politician declared: *"What you are isn't nearly as important as what you appear to be!"*

The Tax Collector
However, the tax collector could not even lift his eyes towards Heaven. He was too conscious of his unworthiness. He simply asked for mercy as he acknowledged his sin. Tax collectors were considered traitors to the Jews. They were classed with robbers and shunned by the respectable. Tax collectors worked for the Roman occupiers and foreign oppressors. They had a well-deserved reputation for dishonesty and corruption.

Humility Before God
This man's posture and position revealed that he wanted to come into God's presence, but felt profoundly unworthy. Therefore he stood at a distance, on the fringes, as far away from the Holy place and from the front where the pharisee was confidently taking his stand. The tax collector's eyes were downcast, his body language spoke of guilt. He beat his chest in grief and sorrow. This man was a picture of humility, brokenness and repentance. He had no illusions about who he was,

or what he was guilty of. His prayer was a cry from the heart: *"God be merciful to me, a sinner!"* This man had not come to recount his merits, but to humble himself before God. There was a desperation. He offered no excuses. He was aware that only the grace of God could meet his need for Salvation. This man could see nothing in himself but sin and he sought nothing of God but atoning grace and mercy. He had no interest in comparing himself with anyone or anything, he was focused on God alone.

God Resists the Proud

Our Lord does not leave us to draw our own conclusions. There is no doubt about the message here: ***"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*** Luke 18:14. The confidence of the religious leader was all delusion and self-deception leading to disaster and damnation. The pharisee was wasting his time, *"for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled…"* His religion was empty, his prayers were futile and his boasting foolish, his faith was misplaced, his hopes were ill founded and he was actually lost, deluded, deceived and damned.

God Gives Grace to the Humble

The pharisee relied on his own merits, not conscious that human righteousness can never be sufficient before a Holy God who demands perfection (Matthew 5:48). Our righteousness is as filthy rags. However, the tax collector relied on God's mercy and he received it. God not only forgave the tax collector, He declared him righteous. Justified freely by His grace through the Redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

Self-Confidence

There is no justification for those who are confident in their own righteousness. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness (Romans 10:3). Until we see ourselves in the light of God's Holiness and God's grace and mercy in Christ, all our efforts are built on a foundation of sand.

God-Confidence

But those who humble themselves will be exalted. The tax collector left the Temple forgiven, freed and transformed. Those who come in humility, with wholehearted repentance and confession, with utter dependence on God, will experience the life-giving and liberating truth that he who humbles himself will be exalted. We need a balanced and Biblical view of ourselves in the sight of Almighty God. We are a fallen creation and we can be saved by God's grace alone, forgiven, freed and transformed. **God resists the proud. He gives grace to the humble**.

Ego Centric

In so many ways this parable is most appropriate for this 'Me generation'. Seldom in history could self-image been at a higher level than today. Surveys of High School students have found that 60% put themselves in the top 10% and no one saw themselves as below average! It has been observed that the most common error in peoples' self-image is not unrealistically low self-esteem, but rather self-serving pride. Not an inferiority complex, but a superiority complex. (*Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* - Myers and Jeeves). As so many American movies proclaim: *"You are the best! The very best!"* Today many think: *I thank God I am not like the pharisee!* As Barney always says: *"You're special!"* Actually, only God is really special.

The Cult of Self

The popularity of 'Health and Wealth', prosperity preachers is to a large extent due to the fact that they do not deal with human sin, as much as massage egos and give lots of self-affirmation. Most people today seem less concerned about God than themselves. The goal is not so much Divine approval as popularity. There is a general assumption that people are *"basically good"* and all we need to do is *"get in touch with your feelings"* and *"follow your heart!"* Secular humanism declares that there is no God, we need to trust in our humanity. Cosmic New Age Humanism declares that

"humanity is deity. Trust the god within you." As one New Age guru declares: *"We are perfect, exactly the way we are, when we accept that, life works!"* At a testimony evening at Summit Ministries in Colorado I heard a youngster claim that the Lord Jesus appeared to her and declared: *"I love you just the way you are. You don't need to change a thing!"* That blasphemous unBiblical deception was bad enough. The amount of *"Amen's"* heard was also disturbing. However, Proverbs 28:26 declares: ***"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool…"***

The Culture of Narcissism

"To live for the moment is the prevailing passion - to live for yourself, not for your predecessors, or posterity." (*The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch). As society has moved increasingly away from Biblical roots, many forces have conspired to fill the vacuum which had traditionally been reserved for God. *"Loving yourself is the greatest love of all." "I need to feel good about myself." "I owe it to myself." "After all, I am a good person!"* Self-esteem and self-actualisation, self-absorption and self-centeredness are the distinguishing marks of our age. How often do we hear of the need for us to *"forgive ourselves"*? Yet only God can forgive sins. It is psycho-babel self-delusion presumption to talk of *"forgiving myself!"*

A Dangerous Delusion

Scripture teaches that all such self-confidence is, in fact, a dangerous delusion. The basic fact of human nature is Total Depravity. Humanity is deeply and fatally flawed. Phariseeism with its good works and religiosity cannot remove our guilt before a Holy God. Secular Humanism *"assigns to man nothing less than the task of being his own saviour and redeemer"* with *"almost infinite powers and potentialities"* (*The Philosophy of Humanism* by Carliss Lamont). However, this salvation has turned out to be, in atheist Bertrand Russell's own words, *"the firm foundation of unshakable despair."*

Self-Deception

New Age Mysticism, with its irrational optimism, can bravely sing of man's *"inherent divinity",* but to do so, it must close its eyes to the realities all around us of sin, selfishness, wickedness, perversion and corruption. Nevertheless, many New Age Humanists declare: *"All ideas of sin, fear and guilt are illusions!"* Such people have clearly lost touch with reality. ***"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."*** 1 Corinthians 10:12

Eroding the Foundations of Civilisation

Despite all our self-absorption and actually because of it, our generation is probably the most anxiety ridden, emotionally unstable, insecure and abusive society in human history. The promise of the Evolutionists, Secular Humanists, New Age Gurus and other believers in *'the power of self'* that they would usher us into a golden age, is mocked by the facts. Those who declare that we should do everything *'my way'*, have not only eroded their own stability, but they have undermined the very foundations of society and civilisation itself. Self has placed itself on the Throne where only God, our Creator belongs. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. We need to reject the cult of self-confidence and return to Biblical God-confidence.

"Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord and He will have mercy on him and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." Isaiah 55:6-7

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