

Message #85

Luke 18:9-14

There was a story I read of a minister who had four children who all won a free gold fish at a carnival. The minister went out to get an aquarium and found they were priced anywhere from \$40-\$70 dollars. He thought that was too much so he kept looking and found a 10 gallon dirty display tank that was on sale for \$10. He decided to buy it. He took the tank home and scrubbed it to the point that it looked brand new. Then the children put all four of their fish into the tank and they watched as all four were swimming in their new home. When the children got up the next day all the fish were dead. The minister knew of a man who had many fish so he called him and he came over to investigate. It didn't take long before he figured out the problem. The minister had cleaned the tank with soap. Even though he meant well, he lacked knowledge of what he was doing and in his own zeal and effort to clean by his own efforts, he killed all the fish. His ignorant zeal killed all the fish.

There are many in the world of religion that are just like that. Dr. Luke had seen many of these Pharisee types. They see themselves as religiously cleaning up the world. They see themselves as completely clean. They have a zeal for God and a zeal for religion and they appear to be living a real good religious life. But the truth is they lack knowledge and the truth is they are spiritually dead.

No one is able to justify himself before God. No one can make himself right with God by his human works. The righteousness of God is only given by God to one who has humbled himself to believe in Jesus Christ. That is what this parable is designed to teach.

Now the immediate context is a context of parables concerning prayer. Carefully observe the first word of **verse 9**, the conjunction "and":

Parable #1 - Jesus challenges His people to be persistent in prayer. **18:1-8**

God promises that He will answer the prayers of His people.

Parable #2 - Jesus challenges His people to be humble in prayer. **18:9-14**

God will only answer the prayers of His people if they admit the truth about themselves.

God will not answer the prayers of people who pretend to be something they are not. He will not answer the prayers of the people who pretend to have a spirituality they really don't have.

However, this has more than just prayer in view; it has an entire philosophy of righteousness in view. This parable clearly has to do with the doctrine of "justification" (v. 14).

Some believe they are right with God by their own self-righteous effort. Others humble themselves and rely totally on the grace and mercy of God. One is alive in a relationship with God and the other is dead.

Our own self-righteous, external religious efforts may impress others, but they do not impress God. This is the essence of what this parable is all about. What is so clear from this text is this:

THOSE WHO ARE RIGHT WITH GOD ARE HUMBLE BEFORE GOD AND NEVER SELF-RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD.

It makes no difference whether salvation, prayer, ministry or attitudes in life, there is no place for a self-righteous, pharisaical spirit before the Holy God.

There are five clear observations we may make:

OBSERVATION #1 – Jesus states why He is telling this parable and to whom He is telling this parable. **18:9**

This is another one of those parables in which the purpose is stated right at the beginning. Obviously this parable is aimed straight at the self-righteous Pharisaical crowd, who thought they were a cut above other people.

These were the real pious religious leaders, known for their religious traditions and observances. Josephus said they were known for their supposed accurate knowledge of all their laws (*The Complete Works of Josephus*, p. 10). It almost seems like Josephus saw them as phonies.

This time, Jesus brings out two attributes about these kinds of very religious people:

Attribute #1 - These were religious people who trusted in themselves. **18:9a**

These were very religious people. They went to worship services, they kept the law, they were leaders and they told other people what they should do. Trent Butler, in his commentary, said, “They saw themselves as the perfect example of God’s righteousness” (*Luke*, p. 297). In their minds, they had arrived.

Attribute #2 - These were religious people who despised others. **18:9b**

These Pharisees saw themselves as being above others and they saw everyone else as beneath them and their righteousness. They saw themselves as perfect and saw others as a bunch of ignorant, depraved sinners.

These Pharisees were extremely religious. They were extremely dedicated to laws and codes and rituals and traditions. They saw themselves as great examples of righteous piety. They strutted around before others trying to convince them to follow them.

OBSERVATION #2 – Jesus begins the parable by two types of men who went to pray. **18:10**

So Jesus decides to tell them a parable. There were two types of men who went to the Temple to pray. Both men were obviously interested in spiritual things because both were going to the Temple to pray. But, as Dr. Darrell Bock said, they were “polar opposites in the first century religious culture” (*Luke 9:51-24:53*, p. 1461).

Sacrifices were offered twice a day (9AM & 3PM) but prayers would be offered at the Temple three times a day: 9AM; Noon; 3PM. People were taught that praying at the Temple was more efficacious and could reach the hearing ear of God faster and quicker.

In Christ’s story, both men went into the Temple to pray.

Type #1 - One of the men was a Pharisee.

Pharisees were powerful, religious leaders. They kept the rules. They were respected men. They were highly educated, very religious and very intimidating. They gave the aura that they were really tuned in to a relationship with God.

Type #2 - One of the men was a tax collector.

Tax collectors were considered by the Pharisees to be the worst kind of sinner (*Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1*). Tax collectors collected money from the Jews for Rome. They also skimmed money from the Jews for themselves (*Luke 19:2, 8*). The Pharisees hated them and saw them as wretched good-for-nothing people.

OBSERVATION #3 – Jesus says the Pharisee offered up his prayer in the Temple. **18:11-12**

Now it was normal to see Pharisees go to the Temple to pray. They were very faithful to attend their prayer meetings. **We may observe the first person singular pronoun “I” occurs five times in these two verses.** This Pharisee is really impressed with himself and he wants others to be impressed with him too.

There are three facts Jesus brings out about this prayer:

Fact #1 - The Pharisee was standing. **18:11a**

This Pharisee went into the Temple and probably right up to the front area of it. I can see this. He wants all people to see him. He goes into this Temple and goes right up front so everyone can look at him and see him.

Fact #2 - The Pharisee was praying to himself. **18:11b**

The Greek preposition “to” does not only mean he was praying about himself; he was actually praying on account of himself and toward himself. His direction of this prayer was not toward God, but he was praying for and to himself.

I have been in prayer meetings where I am convinced the prayer being made is not addressed to God; it is addressed to everyone listening and it is a prayer about the person praying. These kinds of prayers talk about themselves and in the prayer they tell the other people what they want them to hear. They are not truly praying to God. They are praying to themselves.

Fact #3 - The Pharisee thanks God for his own self-righteousness. **18:11c**

This is unbelievable. This guy is standing in the Temple thanking God for himself. He is not thanking God for whom God is. He is not thanking God for what God is. He is thanking God for himself. It gets worse than that; this guy stands in the Temple praying and thanking God that God has made him better than other people.

(Thankful Self Praise #1) - He thanks God that he is not a swindler. **18:11d**

This is a very rare Greek word only used five times in the N.T. (Matt. 7:15; Luke 18:11; I Cor. 5:10, 11; 6:10). It is a word that refers to one who extorts or swindles people out of money (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 60).

(Thankful Self Praise #2) - He thanks God that he is not unjust. **18:11e**

This word has deep theological ramifications. He does not see himself as a sinner practically or theologically. He views himself as completely justified in the sight of God.

(Thankful Self Praise #3) - He thanks God that he is not an adulterer. **18:11f**

Again a rare Greek word used only here and I Cor. 6:9 and Heb. 13:4. This word specifically seems to refer to someone who commits adultery with someone else’s mate.

(Thankful Self Praise #4) - He thanks God that he is not like this tax-collector. **18:11g**

This Pharisee is comparing himself to this tax collector, which he assumes is guilty of all of the above. Fact is he may have been right. Tax collectors were known for those kinds of things.

He is thanking God that he has a spiritual superiority over all these other people. He is thanking God that he is such a great person.

Charles Spurgeon said that there was a man that he considered to be the most spiritual man on earth. Spurgeon said, “I always believed he was perfect, until he told me so.”

Fact #4 - The Pharisee emphasizes his own religious works. **18:12**

This religious guy really depends on his religious works and he loves his religious works. He was proud of himself and his rigid discipline. From a human perspective, this guy looked the part of a spiritual giant. He had the look and he had the legal works. He was proud of himself and his religious actions.

There are two works he publicly mentions:

(Work #1) - He systematically fasted. **18:12a**

Mondays and Thursdays were the typical Jewish fast days. This was not something the Word of God demanded. Under the O.T. Law, there was only one obligatory fast day. The O.T. law prescribed the Day of Atonement, 10th day of 7th month as a fast day (Lev. 16:29).

These Pharisees made up their own laws. This man was more disciplined than the law required. He was actually doing religious things that the word of God did not teach.

This is one of the things that really angered the Pharisees about Jesus. They were known for fasting, and Jesus and His disciples were known for eating and not fasting (Luke 5:33-34).

(Word #2) - He systematically tithed. **18:12b**

Jesus said that Pharisees were greedy, money-hungry religious leaders who were full of robbery and wickedness (Luke 11:39). They made lots of money and they were good tithers.

This Pharisee was a good tither. He apparently followed the tithing codes of Lev. 27:20-32; Num. 18:21-24; Deut. 14:22-27. He paid tithes of “all” he had. That would include money, food, even herbs (Luke 11:42). He was faithful to give his ten percent tithes. **Which shows us a very important truth; tithing proves nothing when it comes to being right with God.**

This Pharisee is standing in this Temple and he does not ask God for one thing because he doesn't think he needs anything. He doesn't think he needs grace, mercy or forgiveness.

The problem of this Pharisee is not his religious works; it is his arrogant, delusional heart. He has come up with his own code and scale of righteousness and he measures up perfectly. This prayer was a prayer designed to praise him, not cry out to God.

This Pharisee would never sing “How Great Thou Art.” He would sing “How Great I Am.”

In the preceding parable, Jesus had challenged His people to continually cry out to Him and to depend on Him; but this guy depended on himself and even prayed to himself.

OBSERVATION #4 – Jesus says the Tax Collector offered up his prayer in the Temple. **18:13**

The tax collector was also in the Temple and he also offered up his prayer. There is an entirely different attitude in the prayer. There are four facts brought out about his prayer:

Fact #1 - He was standing. **18:13a**

The tax collector was standing, but he was standing some distance away from the front of the Temple. He didn't even feel worthy enough to approach God's property. He doesn't think he is worthy to even associate with these very religious people.

Fact #2 - He refused to look up. **18:13b**

He saw himself as such a sinner that he would not even look up toward heaven. He stood there with his head bowed. He did not see himself as being righteous, pure or clean. He saw himself as a dirty filthy sinner.

I hope you get this and understand this. I hope you have experienced this. **This tax collector had such a high esteem for God and a truthful low esteem of self that he would not even look up. The reality of this is he may have been looking down, but his prayers are going up.**

Fact #3 - He beat his chest in a very remorseful way. **18:13c**

The idea of beating one's breast is the idea of being deeply sorry for one's actions. When Jesus was crucified and some of the people realized how wrong this was, they were sorry and beat their breasts (Luke 23:47-48). This tax collector was truly sorry for his failures and sins.

Fact #4 - He prayed to God humbly. **18:13d**

Remember the Pharisee is praying to himself and this tax collector is praying to God.

(Reality #1) - He asked for God's propitiation.

Now certainly grace and mercy are involved in propitiation. But I do not know how English translators have missed this because the word here "propitiation" (ilasthti) is not the word "mercy" (eleos). The propitiatory spot where the blood was poured was on the mercy seat (Lev. 16:5.15-16). It was at this spot where God's wrath and violated righteousness are appeased.

What this tax collector is actually praying is for God to provide an atonement that will appease and satisfy His righteousness and appease and satisfy His wrath and apply it to him.

This tax collector is appealing to God for His forgiveness via an atoning sacrifice realizing he deserves the condemnation of God.

(Reality #2) - He admitted he was a sinner.

The Greek construction here is such that this tax collector views himself as “the” worst sinner there. He sees himself as totally detestable in God’s sight and he asks God for His propitiatory work applied to his life. This tax collector knew he was a sinner who needed the forgiveness of God.

The Apostle Paul would specifically write that there is only one place where this propitiatory grace is found and that is Jesus Christ (Romans 3:24-25).

OBSERVATION #5 – Jesus applies the parable to everyone. **18:14**

When the Pharisee left the Temple, he felt he was good to go. He left feeling good and confident about himself. He had made his point. He had been in front of people. He had told everyone about himself and how great he was. He felt on top of his religious world.

But when he left that Temple, he was not justified. It did not matter how he felt. He was still a sinner and he was still guilty in the sight of God. His going to this religious service meant nothing. He was not forgiven of his sins; in fact, he never even admitted he was a sinner who needed to be forgiven.

Jesus Christ gives three very pointed applications of this parable:

Application #1 - The one who is justified with God is humble before God, not self-righteous before God.

Justification is by faith in Jesus Christ. Justification is a judicial act of God in which He declares a sinner to be righteous and imputes to him the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is only one way to be justified and it is by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul said, “therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). One who goes to God admitting he/she is a sinner will be justified.

Application #2 - The one who exalts himself before God will be humbled.

You can know this directly from the lips of Jesus Christ, if you spend your life praising yourself, God will humble you and crush you.

Application #3 - The one who humbles himself before God and others will be exalted.

You may also know this from the lips of Jesus Christ, if you spend your life seeing yourself as an unworthy sinner, God will honor you and praise you.

Now the context of these two parables is prayer. It is possible for sinful people to pray over and over again to expect God to answer. But He will answer only if one will approach Him admitting the truth.

Our greatest security, when it comes to God, is never found in ourselves or our works. Our greatest security, when it comes to God, is found in relying upon His grace and mercy.

The truth is, we are all sinners and we may all say with the tax collector, "God, we need your saving grace."