The Pharisee & Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Robert C. Newman
9 (NIV) To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men n robbers, evildoers, adulterers n or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 13 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.’ 14 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 Story

Verses 10-14a
The Pharisee

• Since this word now means “hypocrite,” we may easily miss the impact of the story if we are not careful.

• In the first century AD, the Pharisees were the most respected of the Jewish religious groups.

• They emphasized Bible study, prayer & good deeds.

• They were middle-class, with no paid clergy.

• But they did believe they could win God’s favor through their piety.
Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai

I have seen the children of the world to come and they are few. If there are three [of them], I and my son are of their number. If there are two, I and my son are they.  

JT, Ber 13d
The Tax Collector

- Probably never a popular occupation, but in this situation he was a hated renegade, a Jew working for the Roman occupying forces.
- He collected a head-tax, land-tax, crop-tax, import & export duties, tolls on roads, bridges, markets & entrances to towns; taxes on property transfer, animals, vehicles, salt & slaves, not to mention emergency taxes.
Tax Collection

• In the first century, collection was farmed out by the Romans to the highest bidder:
  – Who could use military force to collect
  – Often collected far more than got to Rome
  – Was not above accusing someone to get back at him
  – Accepted bribes from friends, etc.

• The system was so corrupt that it was abolished in the second century.
The Pharisee’s Prayer

- I thank you...
  - Starts off right, with thanks to God
  - But quickly moves to thanking God for how good he himself is!
  - ...that I am not like other men n robbers, evildoers, adulterers n or even like this tax collector.
  - Compare the prayer of Nehunia ben Hakana:
R. Nehunia ben Hakana

I thank thee, O Eternal, my God, for having given me part with those who attend this school instead of running thru the shops. I rise early like them, but it is to study the Law, not for futile ends. I take trouble as they do, but I shall be rewarded & they will not. We run alike, but I for the future life, while they will only arrive at the pit of destruction. *BT*, *Ber* 28b
The Pharisee’s Prayer continued

• I fast twice a week.
  – The OT only required one fast per year, on the Day of Atonement.
  – By ~500 BC, many fasted 4 times a year.
  – By NT times, the Pharisees had gone to twice a week, on Mondays & Thursdays.

• I give a tenth of all I get.
  – The OT required tithes of grain, wine, oil, livestock.
  – The Pharisees went further, to include even garden spices; they also tithed purchases in case seller had not.
The Tax Collector’s Prayer

• Stood at a distance
  – Probably in contrast to Pharisee
  – Today orthodox Jews get as close to Holy Place as possible, putting prayers in cracks in Western Wall.

• Would not look up to heaven
  – Ashamed of his sin

• Beat his breast
  – Sign of mourning
Tax Collector’s Prayer

• Content:
  – God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

• Jesus’ Response:
  – I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.
  – Possibly ironic, since the Pharisee certainly justified himself.
Some Lessons for Us

Verses 9, 14b
Was the Pharisee right?

• Was he really not a robber, evildoer?
  – Was he really loving God with all his being?
    Loving his neighbor as himself?
  – If not, wasn’t he a robber, evildoer?
  – Aren’t we?

• Was he really not an adulterer?
  – Presumably he was faithful to his wife.
  – But Jesus says even lustful thought is adultery.
  – Are we guilty?
Looking down on others (9)

• As churchgoers delivered from some of the obvious effects of sin, it is easy to look down on others.

• This is drastically wrong from a Biblical perspective:
  – Compare a child bragging about power or knowledge to another child.

• There is a danger of substituting cheap works (or even expensive works!) for God’s mercy in forgiving us.
Some Early Christians on Hypocrisy

Let not your fastings be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays & Thursdays. Keep your fast on Wednesdays & Fridays.

*Didache 8*
Jesus’ Lesson (14a)

• The most pious person who thinks he can do more than God requires will fall far short.

• The most wicked person who will repent and turn away from his wicked lifestyle & seek God will find God’s forgiveness. He will be declared righteous because of what Jesus has done.
Another Way of Saying This (14b)

• He who trusts in his own righteousness before God will be humiliated in the judgment.

• He who confesses his sin & trusts in God’s mercy will be declared righteous.

• What are you trusting right now?

• What does the Bible tell you will happen in you should die in this situation?
May we not look down on others, but humbly seek God’s forgiveness.

The End