

## “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector”

Luke 18:9-14

FCF: In coming before God, we trust in our righteousness

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because of the terms God has set,  
(magnet) we must come into His presence with humility.

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Perhaps one of the worst ways any of us would want to be described by others who know us is “prideful” or “arrogant.” For most of us, it would break our hearts if we knew that others found us to be difficult to be around, sensing that we had crossed that fine line between self-confidence and self-conceit in how we relate to others.

As bad as that would be, the reality is that pride and arrogance in our relationships is not only destructive. It is a sign of something deeper, something going on at the level of the heart, something not only on the horizontal plane but the vertical one as well. For pride and arrogance before men is always linked to pride and arrogance before God.

Such pride and arrogance is a serious matter. What do the Scriptures have to say about such things? What can we learn? What do we need to hear?

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Luke 18:9-14

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Most of you know my wife and I have three little ones at home. They are truly a delight. Even being apart from them just for a few days this past week pulled at my heart. Which, of course, makes the reunions so sweet. Again, even this week, each one in their one dear way upon the news I was home, made their way to me with open arms and tight squeezes. No hesitation. Nothing inhibiting them from rushing to me.

Now being the father of these three has gotten me to thinking on no few occasions about the way I, as a child of God, approach my heavenly Father. Do I rush to Him? And if so, how? Or, why? What is the attitude of my heart before God and if it’s not what it should be, what then should it be? Now there are quite a few passages of Scripture that address these types of questions from different angles, but for our purposes this morning, I want to focus our attention on the one we just read a few moments ago.

First, a couple of general principles. In studying the Jesus’ parables, it’s helpful to consider the context in which He tells the story. What is the occasion? Who is there? We read in v.9 (READ Luke 18:9). This is who Jesus is speaking to in this parable. This is His intended audience. It was what Jesus could see in them that brought out this story.

Another thing worth keeping in mind is that Jesus seems to have intended His listeners to read themselves into the story. That is, He wants us to ask ourselves: “*With which character can I most readily identify myself? Who am I most like and what ought I to do about that?*” And so in this particular parable, as we think it through, we need to be wrestling with just that, with who we are most like – the Pharisee or the tax collector.

So, keep those things in mind – who Jesus is speaking to and who we are most like. And one more thing. Jesus told this story to this particular group of people because He loved them enough to challenge them. And He loves us as well – enough to challenge us on these very same issues. How do we approach God? That’s the key question. And what we’ll see as we begin to explore this is that God has set certain terms in how we may come to Him. And the terms are this: we must come to Him with humility.

Well, let’s take a look at the text...

## I. THE PHARISEE

### A) *Who He Was*

#### 1. Explanation

The first character is a Pharisee. Who were they? In a nutshell, they were a group within first century Judaism made up of scribes, scholars, and teachers who focused on the study and teaching of the Old Testament. They saw themselves as guardians of sorts – protecting, explaining, and applying the law. And as a means towards that end, they devoted themselves to developing an oral law as well – a set of rules that served as a “hedge” around the written law so as to prevent people from breaking it.

#### 2. Expectation

They then were regarded as the experts, as men whose ethical standards were higher than everyone else’s. And so when Jesus told this story with a Pharisee as one of the characters, the natural assumption of this audience would have been that the Pharisee would turn out to be the hero. But that’s not quite the way it turns out, is it?

### B) *How He Stood*

#### 1) Confidence

Clearly, there was a problem in this man’s approach to God. And the problem was with his confidence. Not to say we shouldn’t approach God with confidence. Not at all. In fact, other passages of Scripture actually command us to do so. The problem is not confidence in and of itself. The problem has to do with the source of one’s confidence.

#### 2) Misplaced confidence

This man lived an honest life. He was an upstanding member of his community. He went beyond the requirements of the law by fasting, not just annually on the Day of Atonement, but twice a week. He gave a tenth of all his possessions. He was a righteous man. And he knew it. And that was his problem – righteous in his own eyes and confident in his own righteousness. And this led him to come into God’s presence with a self-sufficient chip on his shoulder and then to look down on everyone else.

Look at **how** he prays (READ Luke 18:11a). He addresses God, but one has to wonder to what extent God truly occupied the focus of his attention. In fact, this comes out even more in other translations which read he “*was praying to himself.*” But look also at **what** he prays (READ Luke 18:11b-12). He selectively compares himself with other people, focusing and depending on what he has and has not done in his life. He comes to God on his own terms and, in so doing, Jesus says he “exalts” himself.

I mentioned earlier the need to read ourselves into this parable. And so I have to ask the question: How are we like this man? How do we exalt ourselves?

#### *Illustration:*

Let me tell you a story of a church that suffered from this very thing. On the outside, everything looked great – the budget was in the black, the teaching was grounded in the Scriptures. Again, on the outside, things looked good. But on the inside, the people were smug and complacent. The rot of conceit had set in. They had become but a shell of their former selves. And where was this church? Believe it or not, not in North America or middle Tennessee or even in Clarksville. In fact, they weren’t even a part of this denomination. This was the church of Laodicea in the late first century. Turn with me to Revelation (READ Revelation 3:14-22). Strong words. Jesus said He stood outside His own church, that even though they saw themselves as healthy and vibrant, in reality they were blind and naked beggars. But they wouldn’t admit it.

#### *Application:*

Will you? Do you see yourself as a sinner, as a blind and naked beggar? Or are you like the Pharisee who – even while standing before a holy God – was unable to see or admit the depth of his need and rebellion against God, the depth of his sin?

You see, standing before God, this man **was** a sinner. He just couldn't see it. And the same is true of us. Standing before God, **we** are sinners. But too often, we don't see it any more than he did. In fact, it is our very sinfulness – the shattered state of every human being since the Fall of Adam – that prevents us from being able to really see ourselves as sinners. Our fallen condition is such that we can't see and we recoil at the notion of assessing ourselves as we really are. The problem is deep.

So deep it is a constant struggle. We are constantly comparing ourselves to other people - smugly looking at those around us saying, "*Thank goodness I'm not like them.*" But we are like them. We are like them. Far more than we know. Let me go further. The problem is so deep, the tendency is so strong, so pervasive, that some of us here even now are saying, "*Thank goodness I'm not like that Pharisee who was saying all the while, 'Thank goodness I'm not like those people.'*" Don't you see? Yes, you are.

And more than deep, this attitude, the attitude of the Pharisee, is destructive. It makes us judgmental of our fellow sinners - critical of other believers and self-righteous before the watching world. It splits people apart – poisoning efforts at building up true fellowship. It drives people away – crippling attempts at outreach. May God deliver us all from such a spirit, enabling us to come to Him, not on our terms, but on His.

Which then forces the question. What are His terms? Well, in order to answer that question, we need to take a look at the tax collector – understanding who he was and what he did that was distinct from the Pharisee. Think with me.

## **II. THE TAX COLLECTOR**

### *A) Who He Was*

#### 1. Explanation

Who was he? Well, if the Pharisee was among the most respected of his society, the tax collector was among the most despised. They were widely known for extortion and profiteering among their fellow Jews. And as if this wasn't bad enough, this hostility was aggravated all the more by constant contact with Gentiles, non-Jews and worked on the Sabbath. And so not only were they hated for their ethics, they were despised for their ceremonial uncleanness as well – so much so that we see on several occasions in the New Testament expressions like "*tax collectors and sinners*" or "*tax collectors and harlots.*"

#### 2. Expectation

And so, as Jesus told this story to His original audience, they would naturally have assumed the tax collector would serve as what? The foil, the heel, the one they should scorn. But, again, it doesn't quite work out that way does it?

### *B) How He Stood*

#### 1. Without comparisons

How does this tax collector come into the presence of God? He comes with humility – deeply conscious of his own unworthiness, asking only for mercy knowing he is utterly undeserving of God's forgiveness. And what's worth noting is that, unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector makes no comparisons at all of himself to other people. He never says, "*Thank goodness I'm not like them.*" The comparisons he makes are between himself and God. And so he is saying in his heart, "*I am sorry. Please forgive me.*"

#### 2. Without presumption

We see this in his actions and his words. Look at **how** he prays (READ Luke 18:13a). Instead of boldness, he stands far off from the Holy Place of the temple, not able to lift his eyes or his hands in prayer. Then look at **what** he prays (READ Luke 18:13b). Again, he pours out a simple but powerful confession of his sinfulness and he appeals to God for mercy. And this is an important point. Again, in contrast to the presumptuous Pharisee, he places no confidence in his righteousness. He puts no hope in anything that he has or has not done. His hope and his confidence is in the LORD's grace to forgive sinners. He is, as Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount, "poor in spirit" – not proud, assuming nothing in terms of merit or desert, in a word, humble. And why? Why does he say these things? Because, in the presence of God, he sees himself for who he is.

*Application:*

We've been asking the question, "*What are the terms God has set for us to come into His presence?*" The point of Jesus' words is plain. We cannot come before Him with clinched fists, holding on tightly to what we have or have not done. A clinched fist can receive nothing. We are to go to God with what Francis Schaeffer described as "*the empty hands of faith*" – hands that are open, trusting and ready to receive.

Any other approach is a vain fantasy, a foolish belief that we as finite creatures have something to offer to appease the wrath of a just and holy God against whom we have rebelled and whose love we have spurned. Any other approach dishonors Christ and His death on our behalf. It is to say that His death wasn't good enough, that the price he paid wasn't sufficient enough, that the sacrifice somehow wasn't high enough.

But you see, the gospel has nothing to do with instructions as to what we are to do. The gospel is a declaration of what God has already done. The good news of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with such demands. It is a free offer. And accepting it requires humility, the continual swallowing of our foolish pride.

And, not surprisingly, accepting it has certain practical results as well. It enriches our fellowship with one another – for humble people get along and care for one another. And it bolsters attempts at outreach as well – for those who do not know Christ cannot help but be drawn to people who actually live in such an attractive and winsome way.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

So again, I have to ask, "*What are you bringing into the presence of God? What is your confidence before Him?*" The Pharisee couldn't see any of these things and so he approached God with pride and self-conceit. And how did God respond to him? Look at v.14 (READ Luke 18:14). He did not go home justified, made right with God. But the tax collector did. And why? Because God does not operate as this fallen world does.

Again, what are you bringing into His presence? What are you holding onto besides Him? Is it your clean life? Is it your position and reputation, a life devoted to doing good things? Is it by how well you know these very things? It's good to be right. But it needs to be in the right way. Where are you as you stand before Him?

Let me end with how we began our time this morning – the idea of there being not two but three ways to approach God. The irreligious way that cares not for the rules, the religious way that's fixated on them, and the gospel way that acknowledges it's all of His grace. In a way, it all takes us right back to there only being two – His way and any other. His way is what we were made for, the only source of lasting joy, peace, and hope. May God give us the grace to see the way we are on and the way we need to go.

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