

The Scoundrel and the Saint

Luke 18:9-14

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Things—and people—are rarely what they seem to be. Social media has trained us to be more “image conscious.” People even arrive to church more concerned with displaying a righteous exterior than experiencing the convicting of the Holy Spirit. And this is nothing new. In Jesus’ day, He often rebuked the Pharisees as self-righteous, image-conscious hypocrites. Let’s learn to avoid their tragic example.

While visiting with his grandparents, little five-year-old Andrew pulled out his elementary school yearbook to show them his kindergarten class picture.

He began to describe many of the children; he seemed to know something bad about most of his classmates and he didn’t hold back. He said, “This is Robby here, he hits everybody on the playground; this is Sammy, he never listens to the teacher; this is Amy, she’s always noisy during quiet time; this is Mark, he doesn’t get along with anybody; this is Cindy, she tries to boss everybody around; and this is Billy, he gets mad when he doesn’t win! But then pointing to himself, he said, “And this is me, I’m just sitting here minding my own business.”

Yeah, right!

You learn very young how to compare yourself with other people and always come better than anybody else in class.

We don’t automatically outgrow that tendency, do we? In fact, it can become a dangerous blindspot for a believer; but it can also create for an unbeliever a false sense of spirituality and safety.

Now typically, when the Lord Jesus delivers a parable, you have to work through it to figure out His main point. But here in Luke chapter 18, the Lord will give us the point before delivering the parable.

We've arrived here in Luke's Gospel to chapter 18, now verse 9 and here's His point:

He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.

Luke 18:9

In other words, it's possible to criticize what everybody else in class is doing wrong and make it look like you're just minding your own business; but what you're actually doing is grading everybody in class, and everybody is getting an F or a D or maybe a C-, while you give yourself an A+ in every category.

It's actually more dangerous than that, as we'll see here; it's possible to feel self-righteous while actually remaining unsaved.

Now to illustrate this point, the Lord begins the parable in **verse 10**:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

Luke 18:10

Now Jesus has just described a setting that everyone in his audience would understand.

There were two periods for the Jewish public to come and pray in the temple: one at 9:00 a.m. and the other at 3:00 p.m..

During these two times of prayer, a lamb would be sacrificed—a burnt offering for sin—offered by the priests there at the altar.

Incense would be burning as well in the holy place to represent the prayers of the nation and individuals who were praying in the courtyard.

After the sacrifice, the priest would offer a blessing to the people in the courtyard who had come to pray.

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, [Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor](#) (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 89 & David E. Garland, [Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2011), p. 717

So the setting indicates that it's during one of these times that these two men have chosen to show up to pray.

Now you might guess ahead of time that the Pharisee is going to get in trouble and the tax collector will have a surprise twist at the end.

That's true, but just keep in mind: the audience to whom Jesus is speaking is expecting the opposite.

As far as they're concerned, Jesus has just introduced two men that have shown up here in the courtyard; one man is the cream of the crop,

Pharisees were people devoted to godly living; by and large their peers respected them immensely.

Ralph Davis writes in his commentary that for them, the Old Testament was not some artifact, but the Word of God to be squeezed into the pores of life. They were the people you wanted for next-door neighbors, for Little League coaches for your kids. They were the pro-life contingent, who never missed worship services and small group Bible studies; they were the ones who guarded the conservative values of their nation.

Adapted from Davis, p. 88

They were the cream of the crop!

This other man—the tax collector—is in the bottom of the gutter; The tax collector is a traitor to the Jewish people.

So, the Lord's audience would effectively think that a saint and a scoundrel have shown up for the same prayer meeting.

And everybody listening to Jesus would expect the saint to be patted on the back and the scoundrel to be kicked off the property.

Now before we read this Pharisee's prayer, you need to know that the Jewish people had fixed prayers they had memorized from childhood. But there were also what they called "free prayers," which were unscripted and flowed spontaneously from the heart.

Adapted from R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Augsburg Publishing, 1946), p. 900

And that's both of these prayers here; we're about to listen to the hearts of both men.

And I must tell you, the Pharisee starts out wonderfully in **verse 11**:

"God, I thank you ..."

Luke 18:11b

Stop.

Anytime you start a prayer with the words, "God, I want to thank you," you're heading in the right direction. Sounds like the beginning of a wonderful prayer.

But not this prayer; notice:

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

Luke 18:11

Well, that changes everything. He’s not thanking God; he’s bragging to God.

As one author put it, he has couched praise for himself in the form of thanks to God.

Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 423

He’s effectively just prayed, “God, I thank you that I’m so wonderful.”

This Pharisee is not thanking God for anything because he thinks he’s done everything all by himself.

You could circle five times in this little prayer this man saying, “I.” I, I, I, I, I.

Am I something or what?!

He’s arrived at this hour of prayer, not to show God repentance, but to read God his resume.

And he begins by telling God what he does not do in verse 11 again:

“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’”

Luke 18:11

I don’t do any of that bad stuff.

He’s taken the exam, graded it himself, and given himself an A+.

Adapted from Garland, p. 718

He’s mister clean.

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Luke II* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 193

But he’s mister clean only because he’s comparing himself to people he knows he’s better than, and you can always find somebody you’re better than.

He says here:

- I’m not like those extortioners: stealing from people; who, by the way, are probably behind bars.

- I'm not unjust. He may not be generous either, but he's never moved his property line or cheated anybody out of a fair deal.
- I'm not an adulterer; that doesn't mean he loves his wife, but at least he's not cheated on her.
- And then to top it off, he's better than that tax collector over there. Well, any decent Jewish man would be considered better than those tax collecting traitors who extorted money from their own people by overcharging them and getting away with it.

The problem is, he's comparing himself to other people to whom he can feel superior.

This Pharisee says, "God, I thank you that I'm not like those bad people and especially that tax collector!"

He's an arrogant man!

But be careful here. You might find yourself with his attitude, only in reverse, like the Sunday school teacher who taught her class this parable and then at the end said to the children, "Now class, let's bow our heads and thank God that we're not like this Pharisee."

Now having told God what he does *not* do, the Pharisee turns the page on his spiritual report card and tells God what he **does** do in **verse 12**:

"I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."

Luke 18:12

I mean he doesn't even sit around and wonder if he should tithe off his net salary or gross salary; he tithes on everything he gets!

And fasting! Jewish law required only one day a year for the nation to fast, and that was on the Day of Atonement. But by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had begun fasting twice a week—on Mondays and Thursdays.

They would rub ashes into their cheeks to appear gaunt; they would wear disheveled clothing to appear that they were so given to prayer that they didn't even take the time to bathe or change their clothes.

Adapted from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 223

Jesus challenged them back in Matthew chapter 6 by telling them that they were doing it all **to be seen**. The word Jesus used there gives us our word theater.

They were putting on a show. They had turned fasting into religious theater and the showtimes were the two market days when all the countryside would pour into Jerusalem to sell their wares, and those market days were none other than Monday and Thursday.

This Pharisee has found a few sins he's not guilty of committing; he's added his regular practice of tithing and fasting and once again awarded himself another round of A+.

But it's possible to do something good and mask something evil—like a heart of pride. It's possible to do something right while hiding something wrong.

Reminds me of something I read about where a man in Long Beach, California, went into a fried chicken franchise to get some chicken for himself and the woman who was with him. She actually waited in the car while he went in to pick up their box of chicken.

Accidentally, the manager handed him a bag that had inside it the cash earned that day instead of his box of chicken. The manager had planned to make a deposit and had camouflaged it by putting all the money in a fried chicken box. That was the last time he made that mistake.

He took the bag, went back to his car, and the two of them drove away. When they got to the park for their little picnic, they opened the box and discovered—not chicken—but thousands of dollars of cash.

Now that's a vulnerable moment for the average individual. But not this guy. He realized the mistake, didn't hesitate for a moment, he got back in his car, and they returned to the fast-food store and gave the money back to the manager, who was shocked and elated.

He was so pleased he said to this man, "Listen, stick around; I want to call the newspaper and have them take your pictures and run this story; this is such incredible honesty and integrity."

And the man turned pale and said, "I can't do that!" "Why not?" the manager asked. The man said, "I'm married, but this woman I'm with is not my wife."

Charles R. Swindoll, [Strengthening Your Grip](#) (Word Publishing, 1982), p. 99

Honest in one area, but dishonest in a greater area of life.

See, this Pharisee would have been the poster child for piety, but he was covering up the greater sins of pride and self-worship and unrepentance.

He might be tithing and fasting, but he was only polishing his reflection.

And by the way, you might notice that Jesus never interjects into this parable that this Pharisee is lying, but He does tell us that this Pharisee is lost.

Now verse 13:

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

Luke 18:13

You get the image here that the Pharisee is standing close to the balustrade in the courtyard, the closest spot to where the priest will emerge from the Holy Place and deliver that blessing on the crowd.

But this tax collector is standing—notice—**far off**. He’s probably at the outer perimeter of the Court of Israel.

Adapted from Swindoll, *Insights in Luke*, p. 423

He’s been spotted by the Pharisee, but the Pharisee no doubt is glad to be as far from him as possible.

In these days, if a tax collector walked into your home, your house would be considered tainted with defilement. Even his presence here in the courtyard would not have been appreciated. He would have been avoided like the plague.

I picture him standing here “far off,” meaning all alone.

His prayer is simple and direct: **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”**

He’s actually praying the opening line of **Psalm 51** where King David has been discovered in his adultery with Bathsheba and his role in killing her husband, Uriah.

Jesus says here that he’s also beating his breast, a symbol of mourning at the death of a loved one. He’s signaling that he’s worthy of death; he deserves God’s judgment for his sin.

Ibid

His only hope is that God will forgive him just as God had forgiven King David. And that would be sheer mercy.

The word this tax collector uses for mercy is not the usual word, but a word that described the mercy seat where the blood of the sacrificed animal was sprinkled.

The mercy seat was the lid of the ark of the covenant, that little golden box which contained the tablets of the law given by God to Moses.

The priest would sprinkle blood on that lid—that mercy seat—and God would then look down and see the law people had broken, all those broken commandments, but God would look down at the law through that sacrificial blood, which atoned for sin.

And God was satisfied. His justice was satisfied, and He would show mercy.

That's the depth of this tax collector's prayer request. "I've sinned; I've broken your law; I deserve your judgment but look at me through the blood of the sacrifice."

His prayer anticipates the final sacrifice of Christ where the justice of God will be forever satisfied, not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us.

Let me tell you, nobody will strut into heaven wearing a badge of honor. All the honor and glory and praise belong to our Redeemer.

Now with that, Jesus delivers the verdict in this parable, verse 14:

"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke 18:14

So, two men left the temple after the prayer meeting. One of them felt good about himself; he probably felt great. He had worshipped in the temple; he had received the blessing of the priest; he had publicly shown his dedication to prayer.

He returned home to write a few more A+'s on his religious report card.

The other man walked away, I imagine wiping the tears from his eyes; we're not sure how he felt, we're not told what he thought, but we are told what God thought: God justified him.

God declared him forgiven; He declared him justified; made right with God forever.

Are you justified? Are you saved today? Let me tell you, it won't be because you look good, or sound good, or feel good or even do good things, it'll be because you've admitted to God that you are *not good*.

And that recognition will depend upon whom you compare yourself with. You might find some people around you and easily say, "I'm better than them!"

The question is not, "Am I as good as my fellow man?" the question is, "Am I as good as God and His standard of holiness?"

The great commentator, William Barclay, wrote many years ago of a train ride he took from Scotland to England. He writes, "As we passed through the Yorkshire moors I saw a little

whitewashed cottage and it seemed to me to shine with an almost radiant whiteness. Some time later, I made the journey back to Scotland. The snow had only recently fallen, and it was lying deep all around. We came again to that little white cottage, but this time its whiteness seemed drab and soiled and almost grey in comparison with the whiteness of the driven snow.”

Barclay, p. 225

That’s the point of this parable; once you’ve compared yourself to the freshly fallen snow of God’s purity and holiness, you will have only one thing to pray as you repent and turn in faith to Christ alone.

And that prayer won’t have to be complicated; it will be very simple; it’ll be sound something like, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

And God will answer your prayer and show you mercy forever.

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