

## **Two Men, Two Destinies**

Luke 18:9-14 (05-31-2020)

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Have you ever met a show-off? You're looking at one. I've done some pretty stupid show-off stunts in my life. The Bible says God will humble the show-off. One day I decided to show our kids how I could ramp off the little hill in our back yard – with my 350cc Honda. Glad it wasn't my Harley Sportster. You'll see why. I said, "Look guys, here's how you do it!" I revved it up and was doing great as I hit the hill. I got some air, but something went wrong and the next thing I knew I was lying beside my cycle, which was sticking half-way through the neighbor's wood fence, the wind knocked out of me. Carolyn was looking down on me, wondering if I was going to survive this stunt! Clearly I'm no Evel Knievel! God knows how to humble the show-off!

There are plenty of show-offs in the world: athletic, intellectual, financial, but the worse are religious show-offs. Turn to Luke 18:9-14. Jesus tells a story about two men who went to the temple to pray. They represent the extreme ends of the religious scale in Israel, a highly esteemed Pharisee and an utterly despised tax collector. The thinking in that time was this. If God was going to hear anyone's prayer, it would be the Pharisee's. And if God was going to reject anyone in Israel, it would be the filthy rotten tax collector.

We're familiar with the Pharisees. They were the paragon of Jewish piety. They did all their deeds to be noticed by men. "Look at me pray! Look at me give! Look at me fast! Am I not amazing?" The publicans or tax collectors were Jews who collaborated with Rome to bleed the Jewish people of money in the name of taxation. They were scattered all over Palestine and levied taxes for everything from purchases to sales to uses of roads and crossing bridges. They were hated. If a tax collector was coming down the road, the people would cross to the other side to avoid them. One of the shocking things about Jesus is that He would sit down and eat with them. Matthew 9:10 says many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus. He even called one to be an apostle. This story, in just six short verses, drove home Jesus' point and totally shocked the hearers.

### **The target of Jesus' parable**

*Luke 18:9-10 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

There is no question that Jesus is talking to the proud, self-righteous people who trusted in themselves. Not only that, this group viewed all others with contempt, or as the Greek says, as total nobodies, of no account. Deplorable. I looked up what deplorable means. My handwriting is deplorable! Shockingly bad in quality! So these self-righteous despisers of others are His target and He's going to hit the bull's-eye! This is a superlative story of the grace of God. There they go, two men to the temple to pray, Mr. Holier-than-Thou and Mr. Utterly Despised. Do you see yourself in either?

### **The Self-Righteous Pharisee – full of proud self-adulation**

*Luke 18:11-12 11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'*

This guy is totally obnoxious. We can't believe he is saying these things, and yet our hearts think and our mouths at times say similar things. "I'm not that bad. I'm OK. I'm not as bad as my cousin Abner." Evangelism Explosion uses two diagnostic questions to determine where a person stands regarding salvation. The first is, "Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you know for sure that you are going to heaven when you die?" The typical response is usually, "Well, I sure hope so." The second question is more specific, "If you were to die today and stand before God and He was to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?" The most common answers are, "I've done the

best I could.” “I’m a pretty good person.” “I’m not as bad as a lot of people. I’ve never murdered anyone or robbed a bank. Surely God would let me in.” And in every other religion on earth, the basis for getting to the great beyond or a better place is by trying to do the best you can and keeping the rules of the religion. There are even people in Bible churches who have this mistaken idea.

So let’s see how religious pride oozes from this Pharisee. How does Jesus describe him?

#1 He trusts in himself, his own righteousness, and holds others in contempt. (vs. 9)

#2 He stands praying, but to whom? “He prayed to himself...”

#3 He thanks God for how awesome he is. He wants God to know he is the finest specimen of a religious man. They don’t come any better.

#4 He compares his life with others and comes out way ahead in religious points. “I’m not like other people.”

#5 He’s not guilty of any gross outward sins, but he is completely blind to the sin of his own heart. No one asks him if he ever lusted after a woman in his heart, or told a lie, or cheated on his income tax or hated someone in his heart. He thinks he will look just fine before God.

#6 He views “this tax collector” as hopelessly evil and rejected by God. Where’s his love for his neighbor?

#7 He reminds God of all the wonderful religious deeds he has done. Fasting twice a week is far more than needed. He probably whitened his face and messed up his hair so others would know he was fasting. “Look at me! I’m fasting.” He blows a trumpet as he throws his shekels into the offering bucket. Surely he has done more than enough to earn a high place in the kingdom.

As he stands there in his Pharisaical robes and tassels with a super-pious look on his face, he has just told God what a prize he is and how lucky God should be to have him on his team. No words about sin. No mention about needing redemption. Nothing about guilt or repentance. He is so full of himself he is way too big to get through the narrow gate to heaven. But in spirit he’s not unlike most people in this world who are convinced that if their good deeds outweigh their bad, they’re good to go and ready to enter heaven. What a sad surprise awaits them.

### **The Contrite Tax Collector – convicted humility**

*Luke 18:13 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!’*

What a contrast! This man, whom the Jews despised, prays a seven word prayer. And it is really a prayer. God has been dealing with this man’s heart. Somehow he became aware of God’s righteousness and he knew his own guilty heart. Calvin says, “Man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.” (Institutes) This tax collector knew he didn’t deserve a thing from God except rejection and judgment. He was crushed under the weight of his sin and guilt.

#1 He feared to draw near. He knew the temple represented God and His holiness. He stood afar off. He wanted to pray but he stayed in the foyer, even outside the door. He wasn’t good enough to come near. But he knew he needed God.

#2 He didn’t even look up into heaven, where he knew God was. How could he, a guilty sinner, be accepted by the holy God? And yet he had some hope. Just maybe God might hear his prayer.

#3 He was beating upon his breast as a sign of his deep sense of guilt and condemnation. He felt that his sin and iniquity were overwhelming him. Maybe he remembered David’s contrition in the Psalms

*Psalm 38:4, "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me."*

*Psalm 51:17, "A broken and a contrite heart you will not despise."*

#4 But he actually prayed to God. Unlike the Pharisee who just reminded God how wonderful he was, this man is crying out to God. He needs God. He is desperate under the sense of his sin. He knows only God can save him. He certainly can't save himself. If God asked him why he should let him into heaven, he would readily confess, "There is no reason. There is plenty of reason why you shouldn't let me in. I have nothing to bring to you except my guilt."

#5 He begged God to be merciful or, as the original language says, be propitiated to him. He knew about the mercy seat in the holy of holies on top of the ark containing the law he had broken. He knew about the blood that was sprinkled on it on the Day of Atonement. He knew that blood represented the death of a substitute so the people could be forgiven. That death propitiated or satisfied God's wrath against sin. And so he is crying out to God, "Let your wrath I deserve be satisfied through the blood of atonement for my sin."

Christ is our propitiation. How much this man understood we don't know, but he knew he needed God's mercy. God's wrath against sin must be propitiated if we are to be forgiven. And Jesus hung between sinners and God and shed His blood, laid down His life, sacrificed himself as a substitutionary atonement for sinners! That's what this poor guilty wretch is crying out for. This was his only hope. He uttered not a word about his good deeds – he didn't have any. He acknowledged he deserved death and punishment, but with a heart of hope he cries out for God to save him.

#6 He freely confesses to God that he is *the* sinner. Not a sinner, but *the* sinner. He's not comparing himself with anyone else, not even with other tax collectors who were maybe worse than he. No "I know I've sinned, but I'm a pretty good person, really. I have a good heart." Instead he stands with Job, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes;" with Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am ruined;" with Peter, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man;" and with Paul, who confessed, "Jesus came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am chief!"

What a contrast between the highly esteemed and righteous Pharisee and this contemptible, despised tax collector. Both are full of nothing but sin, but one is so full of pride he can't see his own sin. The other knows his sin and all he can beg for is mercy or that God would be propitiated by the sacrifice for him. One stands with his head held high in religious pride, cocksure of his religious standing, the other with his head bent down, crushed under the weight of his sin.

#### **The shocking verdict on these two worshipers.**

*Luke 18:14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Don't miss how this verse begins, "I am telling you." Remember, Jesus is talking to those people who trusted their own righteousness and thought they were better than others. His audience is fully expecting Him to honor the honorable Pharisee and let that tax collector know he doesn't deserve anything from God.

The Pharisee had said, "Or even this tax collector." But Jesus turns it and says, "No, this man, this despised, hated but broken tax collector went to his house justified, accepted, declared righteous by God rather than the other." They must have gasped, "What? What? You can't mean it." Yes, Jesus meant it. He didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

The tax collector went home a justified man. How beautiful. God answered his prayer, just as God answers any prayers like this man prayed. God regarded him as just or righteous. The Pharisee had only his own regard of righteousness, which meant nothing before God. The despised tax collector's sin was completely forgiven, Jesus' perfect righteousness was imputed to his account. The man who stood far

away, who wouldn't look into heaven and beat upon his breast in contrition over his sins was fully and forever brought near and accepted by God. What a story of amazing grace.

Jesus ends this story with this axiom: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Remember that proud dad and the broken fence? Pride will result in humiliation. This self-righteous Pharisee who exalted himself will be humbled. Proverbs 29:11, "A man's pride will bring him low." As Scripture repeatedly reminds us, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

As believers we need to ask God to strip away our blindness to our own pride. That show-off Pharisee is not totally unlike us. We need to continually put off our proud, self-promoting spirit, and put on a heart of humility, quick to confess we are the sinner. Just like the tax collector, we are saved by pure grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Listen to this great verse in Romans 4:5.

*But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.*