

A Tale of Two Mirrors: *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

Before the coronavirus hit, we were in a series going through the parables of Jesus, and before we left that series there was one more parable that I wanted us to look at. It's the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector, found in Luke 18:9-14.

Remember those carnival mirrors that would completely distort your image when you stood in front of them? One mirror would make you look 10 feet tall, another would make you look 3 feet tall. Depending on the curve of the glass, you might look really thin or really heavy. What they never did was give you an accurate view of yourself or those around you.

Spiritual pride is a lot like that carnival mirror, distorting our perception of ourselves, of others, and of God. Spiritual pride bends the glass to make us look far better than we do, others look worse than they do, and God look far closer to us than He is. Spiritual pride curves the glass so that we think we have it all right, when the truth is we have it all wrong.

This parable is for those who are looking in the mirror of spiritual pride –for those who trust in their righteousness and look down on others. Jesus loves us enough to hold up the mirror of God's word - God's truth - to give us a true reflection of ourselves, others, and most importantly, God. Before we jump in, let's pray and ask God to help all of us open our hearts, let the Spirit do real and honest work on us. The thing about spiritual pride is those who have it the worst think they have it the best! The ones who need this message the most will think they need it the least. We all need this – especially if we don't think we do!

So let's pray and ask the Holy Spirit to do His good and honest work on our hearts.

Two men walk into the temple. Like all of us, they have their own sense of reality about themselves, others and God. Jesus helps us see them from their own perspective, and then raises us up to see it all from God's perspective.

The Pharisee

The Pharisee thinks he's really tight with God. He's good, he's spiritual, he's mature, he's dedicated, he's obedient, he's *better than the next guy*. We see this from the prayer that flows from his heart:

'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

From the Pharisee's prayer we can see three things about spiritual pride:

1. It's self-focused

His prayer is all about himself. One person put it this way, *he glances at God but contemplates himself*. God isn't the focus of this prayer, he is.

Pride gets us focused on ourselves. There's a Latin phrase, *in curvitus se* that means the inward curve of sin. Sin revolves us around ourselves. Spiritual pride is just sin dressed up in religious garb. Spiritual pride is self-focus with a little God-talk sprinkled in. A glance at God, but a constant contemplation of ourselves.

Spiritual pride fixes our eyes on ourselves rather than on Jesus. One of the important ways the Holy Spirit works in our hearts is by getting our eyes off ourselves to behold the glory of Jesus Christ – we aren't transformed by constantly looking at ourselves but by looking to Christ.

Spiritual pride is self-focused.

2. It trusts in what we do

Luke says Jesus told this parable to people who trusted in their own righteousness, and we see that with the Pharisee. He's all about what he does and doesn't do:

He does fast, he doesn't extort. He does tithe, he doesn't commit adultery, he isn't unjust, he doesn't even stoop as low as that tax collector standing on the other side of the temple.

It's good to fast and tithe and it's good *not* to extort or commit adultery. The problem here isn't with what he's doing and not doing. The problem is he's trusting these things to make him right with God. Spiritual pride takes inventory of what we do and don't do and takes pride in that inventory. We find our trust leaning on what we do rather than what Christ has done. The Pharisee is a legalist – he's trusting his own righteousness to make him right with God.

3. It looks down on other people

That's what contempt is: looking down on people. Do you realize that two thirds of his prayer is a put down of other people? Jesus says he stands by himself – even back then this Pharisee was practicing social distancing, not to avoid a virus, but to avoid getting tainted by the sins of those kind of people.

We should be concerned when we start distancing ourselves from people just because they don't agree with us. We should be concerned when we start looking down on people because we don't think they're as spiritual as we are. We need to be concerned when we start to put people down in order to make us feel better about ourselves. We need to be concerned when we cast people in the worst light in order to put ourselves in the best light.

A lot of the conflicts in the church aren't over disagreements. Good Christians can disagree over things that aren't foundational truths of the gospel. It's not disagreement that separates and divides. It's pride that causes us to divide and put down and be suspicious and question motives. I find that I can be quite magnanimous towards people's differences...until they differ with me. Until they criticize something I do. Until they question my motives. Then I find a lot of junk can rise up in my heart.

The Pharisee walks into the temple impressed with himself and confident that God is impressed with him too. If this Pharisee were listening to this message, he'd be agreeing with everything I'm saying, but he'd think none of it applied to him. Cause he has his act together. That's his perception of reality.

The tax collector

The tax collector walks in and Jesus says he stands afar off. It's not pride, it's shame that has him stand far away by himself. He can't even lift his eyes towards heaven. Shame has him pray with his eyes to the ground. It's real shame – he really is a sinner. And all he can bring himself to ask God for is mercy.

Last Sunday my boys and I watched the Passion of the Christ. It's a tough movie to watch but I found my heart tremendously moved as I considered what Jesus endured in my place. Our sin isn't small. If you wonder whether your sin is a big deal or not, consider what Jesus had to suffer to save you from it. Self-

righteousness might acknowledge that we are sinners, but our sin isn't that bad. It's manageable. Actually, it's not. Jesus died for your sin and mine.

We won't realize how much we need mercy until we realize how bad our sin is. The thief on the cross didn't negotiate with Jesus, he didn't offer good works as payment for getting into Paradise. He simply asked Jesus for mercy. Jesus loves to give mercy to those who ask it.

Chances are the tax collector probably thought that God was impressed with the Pharisee and looked down on him. That was his perception of reality.

Jesus then authoritatively takes us upward into heaven and tells us God's perspective. Jesus knows how God views these two men. It was the tax collector who asked for mercy who left the temple justified. His sin was blotted out. His prayer was pleasing to God and answered. He is the one who actually had a right understanding of who God is and who he is. He was the one who started a relationship with God, because he came not trusting in his own righteousness, but trusting in God's mercy.

Jesus ends by giving us an accurate mirror to see ourselves, others, and God in: *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

This is the secret of the kingdom of heaven this parable reveals. This is the heart of God this parable reveals: when we promote ourselves, God will put us down, when we humble ourselves, God will lift us up.

Let's bring this home to where we live. As Christians we need to fight every day to trust in Christ alone and renounce any reliance upon our good works to make us right with God. We do good works – absolutely – but not to earn God's approval, but because through Christ's completed work on the cross, we have God's approval, and out of that we can live life large to the glory of God!

Here's a secret: we hold onto all the junk cause we're afraid if we let go of it, we'll be exposed, we'll be ashamed, we'll be rejected. We're afraid if we don't live life from a curved mirror that makes us look better than we are, we won't be accepted. My heart holds onto the junk out of deeply entrenched fears and defenses. You do too. Trusting Christ also means trusting him with who we are, believing that as we look in the true mirror, and see reality as God sees it, we'll see ourselves as deeply loved sons and daughters. We'll see others as people God loves and values – so much so Jesus died for them. And we'll see God as a kind, compassionate, Father who loves to give mercy to those who ask. Let's ask.