



**Luke 18:9-14**  
***Jesus Only Saves Sinners***

9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

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

11 "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

12 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

13 "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

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

In the previous parable Jesus taught us the value of perseverance in prayer, but he was aware that there were many in his time who were importunate in a kind of prayer that would never prevail with God. So now Jesus is teaching us not merely to be diligent in prayer, but to pray in the right spirit. For prayer, no matter how diligent it may be, if it springs from a bad heart is just as useless as the vain repetitive prayers of the heathens that he warned against in Mark 6:9.

Now as we come together to this parable, I want desperately for you to see what it teaches with new eyes. Because over the years this weird transition has taken place where the Pharisee and Publican have changed places. Nowadays, everyone associates themselves with the tax collector in this parable, and everyone is contemptuous of the Pharisee, but you see when Jesus originally told this parable, no one, not even many of his Apostles would have immediately associated themselves with the publican. For them to have done so would have been like me starting a story with "Two men went up to Church to pray, a conservative politician and an abortionist, and you all thinking "***Oh yeah, that's me, the abortionist.***" In fact, the end of his story, that the publican went away justified, *and not the Pharisee* would have been deeply shocking to almost everyone listening. Remember also, that the inspired introduction that Luke gives "*He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others*" wasn't included in what Jesus originally said.

Why was that? Well think about the Jewish society of the time and then the people whom Jesus used in the parable and be thinking at the same time about where you might have been in that society.

1) First you had the ***Saducees***, these guys were religious formalists, they were culturally conservative generally but religiously liberal, kind of the old main-line denominations of their time. The center of their religion were the yearly ceremonies of the temple, which they effectively controlled rather than the local synagogues which were controlled by the Pharisees.

It's a situation analogous to the fact that the old main-line denominations the PCUSA, the Episcopalians, the United Methodists, and so on still control the vast majority of the historic churches and Cathedrals, while evangelicals like us have to meet in recently built metal buildings. Now, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they only accepted the first five books of Moses, and they weren't big on what we might call personal religion and generally were all about maintaining personal peace and prosperity. They generally didn't openly collaborate with the Romans, but they accepted their rule as the status quo.

- 2) Then you had the *Pharisees*, these were the men who were the bible scholars of their time. They emphasized personal piety and keeping the commandments. They believed in the resurrection, they were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, they regarded all the books of the Old Testament to be the inspired word of God. They were the pillars of virtue in their society, they were also strongly patriotic and nationalistic, to them the worst problem in Israel was the ongoing Roman occupation. If you want to get an idea of what that felt like, imagine if China conquered the USA someday and occupied Washington D.C.
- 3) Then you had the *collaborationists*, these were the carpetbaggers of their age, people who collaborated openly with the Romans in governing and administrating the province or who flaunted the Jewish law by trading and dealing with Gentiles, both Greeks and Romans. They included the Herodians and of course people like the tax collector, who were given protection and who were allowed to keep any money they collected from the people above the quota they were required to send to Rome. Although the majority of these collaborators were 100% Jewish by birth. Their decision to help the Romans made them despised by the vast majority of people. They were therefore not generally religious and definitely unwelcome at the synagogues. They were constantly being assassinated.

Now of course there were other smaller sects, Zealots, Essenes, etc. but these were the main players in the society, and generally the ordinary peoples allegiance went to one group or another. The majority of the Jewish people outside of Jerusalem admired and supported the Pharisees. Try to put yourself in the shoes of those people at that time and ask "*where would my sympathies have been?*"

Well lets talk about these two guys, who went up to pray, and the prayers they offered up.

- 1) First we have the **Pharisee**: This is a man who probably prayed 3 times a day, every day of the week, and whenever he could, he would do so at one of the regular hours for prayer in the Temple. As he comes into the temple on this particular day he is offended to see a tax-collector in this holy place. He's is filled with righteous indignation. And as he prays, standing away from the tax collector, he acknowledges the sovereignty of God. And I want you to see that he does have a high view of God, he acknowledges that God is the potter and we are the clay. And so he thanks God that the Lord has made him the way he is and not like these openly irreligious and sinful men.

Also, please do not fall into the trap of assuming that he is standing there lying to God. Not at all. He probably was not outwardly any of those things, he probably didn't extort money or cheat on his wife. Not outwardly. Keep in mind what Paul said about his own zeal for the law when he had been a Pharisee:

**Phil. 3:4 If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:**

**5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;**

**6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.**

This was the kind of guy you wanted to have living next door or babysitting your kids and NOT the tax-collector, but we'll get to him in a moment.

The Pharisee then begins to roll off all the good works that he is doing in order to be accounted as righteous, and these are works that go well beyond the requirements of the Law.

The Law said they should fast once a year, on the day of atonement. This man fasted twice a week! He gave tithes (10%) of everything he owned, the law didn't say you had to tithe everything.

But what is wrong with this prayer? *It is not that it is hypocritical*

a) **There is no humility in it, only pride and an all too common pride at that.** How does he think of himself? Blameless, upright, good, a keeper of the law. "*Deep down inside, I have a heart of Gold.*" He compares himself to the worst of men, and comes off very well by comparison. *I'm a good man. I have tried to live a good life, and I have succeeded!* As *Prov. 20:6 Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, But who can find a faithful man?* He is very satisfied with his own performance.

It never even occurs to him that his own sins, though not as flagrant as the tax collectors might be just as heinous in the eyes of God, and perhaps more so because they are compounded by so much pride.

b) **It is full of scorn and contempt for the tax collector, who though he is a sinner, is still his neighbor.** If he'd obeyed the command to love his neighbor as himself, he would have been praying *for* the tax collector, not against him.

c) **It is full of self-justification.** The Pharisees, as Jesus pointed out previously in Luke 16 attempted to justify themselves before men through their good works. There is no petition in this prayer. He asks God for nothing, because he presupposes he has no need. He is a good man, he is doing good works, he will merit heaven. What else does he need to do but thank God for making all this possible??? Its like one of those awful speeches on Oscar night. "*I just want to thank all the little people who made this possible...*"

2) **What about the Tax Collector?** Don't fall into the trap of thinking this is basically a good guy, this is a bad guy. A genuinely big sinner. Don't denude this parable or his prayer of its force by assuming anything else. This is not some poor bureaucrat from the IRS this is a man who made his living by extorting money by force from poor people. Think in terms of him being the cause of small shop owners going bankrupt, widows losing their houses, parents selling their children. People ending up cheated, enslaved, or starved so that he could line his own pockets.

Please note though, that he goes to the house of God seeking forgiveness. If a tax-collector can go to the temple no church can or should ever turn away sinners. We should not give the impression

that we have a "no sinners please" sign on the front door – the only way that might be justified would be by saying "no sinners please – we're full"

***But what is different about his prayer?***

***1) It is full of humility: This man is full of conviction of his sin.*** So much so that he feels physical anguish. He beats his breast, his eyes are cast down. Truly he feels the same anguish that David did when he wrote in ***Psalm 32:4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah***

***5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah***

He is bowed down like Christian beneath the burden on his back, and he comes into the presence of God without any presumptions. He comes knowing that in his current condition he is lost and hellbound.

Also, he is not merely saying that he is a sinner, but rather he actually calls himself in the Greek, "the sinner" – I can't tell you how often you will encounter Christians who are willing to say yes, yes, I'm a sinner, we are all sinners, but who say it like sin is the lightest thing in the world. This man feels the weight of a burden that will sink him lower than the grave.

***2) It seeks justification only in the grace and mercy of God:*** He doesn't go to the Priests of the temple seeking forgiveness through confession or animal sacrifices. He avoids the vain route of formalism. He doesn't plead his works or his righteousness compared to other men who are worse than He, *he simply cries out to God from a heart broken by conviction of sin.* This is the sacrifice that God is looking for. ***Psalm 51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart -- These, O God, You will not despise.***

What can he plead with God? He has nothing in his hands that he can bring to justify himself. All he can do is trust in the promises of God. Perhaps taking hold of a dimly remembered scrap of verse he heard in his childhood –

***Isa. 55:6 Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near.***

***7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.***

So he comes, seeking not to be justified by works, but through faith alone.

*And he is the one who is granted what he is seeking! The Pharisee on the other hand, leaves the temple in exactly the same condition that he arrived. The Pharisee arrived lost, carnally presuming he was saved already, and left just as lost. The tax collector arrived knowing he was lost, and was saved through faith alone.*

So what are the Applications of this verse:

Let me give you three,

The first is a contemporary one, the main problem of our day is not that we are in much danger of falling into the ancient brand of Pharisaism that this man practiced. It is not that we are all too scrupulous for the works of the law in our culture.

Rather as I said earlier, today the Pharisee and Tax Collector have traded places, and men generally have a very low view of the holiness of God, the importance of the law, and the seriousness of sin. As TW Manson put it:

*'It is one of the marks of our time that the Pharisee and the publican have changed places; and it is the modern equivalent of the publican who may be heard thanking God that he is not like those canting humbugs, hypocrites and kill-joys, whose chief offense is that they take their religion seriously.'*

Many today think therefore that we will be justified, simply because they aren't hypocrites and they sin openly. Well, brothers and sisters, the message of the parable isn't don't worry about sin, don't take it seriously, you'll be alright as long as you don't act Pharasical.

Rather the application of this parable is that if we are going to be justified before God and be saved, it can only be by acknowledging that we are sinners and that we can only be through Faith alone in Christ alone.

Kids, let me ask you a couple of questions, if I get on route 95 and start driving south, how many hours do you think I'll need to drive south for before I get to *Disneyland*?

You see that's a trick question, *Disneyland* is in Anaheim California, I can drive south on route 95 until I end up in the ocean, I'll never ever reach *Disneyland* because that road doesn't go there.

That Pharisee could spend his entire life working on getting to heaven by the works of the law, but he is never going to get there, because the works righteousness road doesn't end in heaven.

Romans 9:30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even **the righteousness of faith**;

31 but Israel, pursuing **the law of** righteousness, has not attained to **the law of** righteousness.

32 Why? Because *they did* not *seek it* **by** faith, but as it were, **by the works of the law**. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.

16 "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

Let me ask you another question, if your parents tell you to make your bed, how many times do you need to brush your teeth before they will be happy? You can brush your teeth all you want, but that won't make them happy because that isn't what they asked you to do. King Saul was told to do something, but he didn't do it and instead said to himself, I'll do this it will make the Lord Happy, but Samuel said to him *"Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams."*

That Pharisee figured he could make the Lord happy by doing things the Lord hadn't commanded while neglecting to do the things the Lord did command, his heart was filled with Pride rather than love to God and his neighbor. Had he humbled himself, realized he was a sinner in need of

salvation, and put his faith in the promised Messiah alone, then he would have been saved. Instead he trusted in good works.

Now good works, giving money, and things, are good if they are simply the fruits of a justified heart, but when we view those works as way of earning our justification, then we are trying to justify ourselves, trying

To exalt ourselves, and as JC Ryle put it: We never begin to be good until we can feel and say that we are bad.