

Proposition: In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14, Jesus identifies two approaches to being right with God.

- I. The Pharisee: Some approach God based on their merit (9-12).
 - A. It's evident by his conduct (11).
 1. He called attention to himself.
 2. He prayed to himself.
 - B. It's evident by his claims (12).
 1. I'm not as bad as many.
 2. I do a lot of good.
- II. The Tax Collector: Some approach God based on His mercy (13).
 - A. It's evident by his conduct.
 - B. It's evident by his confession.
 1. He admitted the truth about himself.
 2. He admitted the truth about his need.

Implications (14): To be right with God, we must trust in His mercy, not our merit.

1. It affects the way we view God.
2. It affects the way we view ourselves.
3. It affects the way we view others.

Are there many ways to God? Many people think so. In fact, one of the obstacles we encounter as we try to convince people to become Christians is the comeback, "That's just your opinion. Look at all the religions in the world. And look at all the denominations. How do you know *your* way is right? Do you have a corner on the market or something?! There are many ways to God, many approaches."

How should you respond to a comment like that? Take the person to Jesus. Did you realize that according to Jesus, there are only *two* approaches to God, and one of the two is a dead-end street. Indeed, we can review all the religions of the world, and take off all the external wrapping and fancy decoration, and we'd end up with two basic approaches to God. We see them both in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14. In this story, Jesus identifies two approaches to being right with God.

I. The Pharisee: Some approach God based on their merit (9-12).

Have you ever met a self-righteous person? It's not a pretty sight, is it? It's not very uplifting to be around a person who is righteous in his own eyes. Ironically, it's not always easy to detect self-righteousness, especially if the self-righteous person is *you*.

The parable we're about to hear was intended for self-righteous people. Notice verse 9, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable." How do you detect a self-righteous person? Luke identifies

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two red flags: one, a self-righteous person has an inflated view of himself, and two, a judgmental view of others.

Jesus told this parable to confront people who were trusting in themselves, in their own ability to please God. When the Lord shared this story, the Cross was approaching. He had encountered a variety of responses to His ministry. The commoners were enamored with Him. A handful of disciples committed their lives to Him. And then there were the religious leaders--they had no room for Him. To them, He was irrelevant. They saw no need for Jesus. As far as they were concerned, they were just fine with God.

By the way, can a self-righteous person ever change? No, not on their own, but they can *be changed*. Remember what God did what Saul of Tarsus? The Lord can change anyone--that includes both down-and-outers and up-and-outers.

Jesus' story begins in verse 10, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." The temple was for the Jews the most sacred place in the world. Jesus said two men went there to pray.

Ponder that for a moment. When we hear that two men went to pray, we naturally envision private devotions. We assume these two men were going to the temple to spend some private, prayer-time with God. But that understanding reflects our Western individualism, not first century Judaism.

Indeed, the background of this parable assumes a context of public worship. Though in the New Testament, the word "pray" can refer private prayer, it often represents corporate worship (as in Acts 2:42 where we're told the early church devoted itself to "prayer," an activity of the group). So in Jesus' parable. Two men are heading to the Temple to participate in public worship.

But what was the occasion? Every day there were two public worship services in the temple. Every day the priests offered two atonement sacrifices, one at dawn, and the other at 3:00 in the afternoon. Each time a lamb was sacrificed to cover the sins of the people. The smoke from the sacrifice would ascend from the altar and fill the temple area. During the incense offering, people would gather for prayer (for corporate worship) in the Temple court. Their private prayers are part of the worship service.

That's the background for this parable. Two men went to the temple court at the time of sacrifice, both intending to pray. One was a Pharisee. Don't let your preconceived notions taint the story. In first century Judaism, the Pharisees were the good guys. They kept God's Law, and were considered to be role-models. Jesus' listeners could understand why a Pharisee would be at the worship service.

But the second fellow--a tax collector? He's the bad guy in the first century. He's the traitor who works for the Romans and cheats his own people out of hard earned money. What's *he* doing in the temple?! In contemporary terms, it would go like this, "Two men went to church one Sunday. One was a Red Cross worker, and the other a drug dealer."

Jesus turns the spotlight on the Pharisee first of all. His was a merit-based approach to God, as evidenced by two factors.

A. It's evident by his conduct (11). "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.'" Notice a couple of things the Pharisee did.

1. He called attention to himself. Verse 11 says he "stood up." That's not unusual, for standing is an accepted posture for prayer in the Bible. Yet how he stood is

interesting. In our English Bibles, the phrase "with himself" modifies how the Pharisee prayed. As the NIV puts it, he "prayed about himself." But it's possible that the phrase can modify the verb "stood." That is, he "stood by himself."

Why would he do that? When the rest of the people gathered in the temple court for public worship, why would this Pharisee isolate himself from them? Isn't it obvious? He considered himself more righteous than them. He didn't need them. He prided himself in his separation. In fact, if he accidentally brushed against the tax collector while in Temple worship, he would contract "midrash-uncleanness." He didn't want that, so he stood aloof from the others.

A word of application. What does God think of a church-goer who comes to Sunday worship, yet refuses to interact with the rest of God's people, and thinks, "Worship is between me and God. I don't need anybody else. I have my Quiet Time, and I can worship God fine all by myself, thank you."? Jesus addressed that issue in Matthew 5:23-24, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." In worship, we are not islands. We must not be like the Pharisee who had a self-absorbed view of worship.

2. *He prayed to himself.* He stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men." If we're honest, we've prayed like that before, haven't we?--not to please God, but to impress ourselves and those around us.

The truth is, the Pharisee didn't really pray. He merely advertised himself in public. His intent wasn't to worship God, but to inform God how good he was. That's dangerous. Oh, he said the right words, "God, I thank you," but he wasn't really thankful. Instead, he boasted of his own self-righteous merit. He congratulated himself.

Here was a man who thought he could approach God based on his merit. His conduct isn't the only evidence of this either...

B. It's evident by his claims (12). What kind of claims does he make? Notice two.

1. *I'm not as bad as many.* In verse 11, the Pharisee announced what wasn't true of him, "I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector." Was he right? Was he truthful when in essence he said he wasn't as bad as many. Frankly, there are a lot of people who assume they will go to heaven because of the same conviction, "Well, I may be a sinner, but there are a lot of people a whole lot worse than me in this world. I'm not as bad as them!" A second claim follows naturally...

2. *I do a lot of good.* In verse 11 the Pharisee announced what wasn't true of him. In verse 12, he states what was true, "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." A lot of what he said was true. And impressive.

Jewish law required a person to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. This fellow fasted twice a week (probably on Monday and Thursday, the market days). Furthermore, the Law stated that a person had to tithe on certain items, like grain, wine, and oil. But how much did this man tithe? On *all* that he possessed. Indeed, he wasn't like other men. He went beyond what the Law required. He exceeded religious expectation. And he was proud of it.

There's a good chance that the Pharisee prayed out loud. It was Jewish practice to pray audibly. In this case, the Pharisee used his prayer as an occasion to preach to those around him. He "graciously" offered them a good look at a truly "righteous" man.

The Pharisee represents the first approach to being right with God. It's based on merit, personal accomplishment. What's God think of that? We'll soon see, but first, let's notice a second approach, as represented by the tax collector.

II. The Tax Collector: Some approach God based on His mercy (13).

We're introduced to the tax collector in verse 13, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast, and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" How do we know the publican approached God based on mercy? We see two evidences in the story.

A. It's evident by his conduct. Where did the tax collector go for this temple worship service? He stood at a distance (KJV "afar off"). It wasn't out of pride either. Unlike the pompous Pharisee, this man avoided the crowd out of shame and humility. He made no pretense. He didn't try to fool the crowd. He was a sinner, and he knew it. In fact, he did something quite amazing.

He "beat his breast." Commentator Kenneth Bailey offers some helpful insight into the cultural significance of this behavior. The gesture is still used in villages all across the Middle East, from Iraq to Egypt. A person clenches his hands into fists and strikes his chest in rapid succession. He does so, however, only in times of extreme anguish or intense anger.

For instance, Shiite Muslims beat their chests during the Ashura ritual. In this ceremony, they reenact the murder of Hussein, the son of Ali who was the son in law of Mohammed. The Shiites dramatically portray the murder scene. They take knives and razors and lacerate their shaved heads to demonstrate the intense anguish they feel when they recount this event. In addition, during this ritual they *beat their breasts*.

There are only two places in the Bible where someone beats their breast. This is one. The other is in Luke 23:48. Do you remember what happened there? A whole group of people "smote their breasts." Do you know why? They had just witnessed the horrible crucifixion of the Son of God. It takes something the magnitude of Golgotha to evoke this gesture from Middle Eastern men.

The tax collector didn't presume to approach God on his merit. When he honestly pondered his merit, what he deserved, only one response was appropriate--he beat his breast! He knew he couldn't come to God based on his goodness, as evidenced first of all by his conduct. We see a second evidence...

B. It's evident by his confession. Listen to what he said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Pop psychology would say, "We know this guy's problem. He's got a poor self-esteem! He needs to think positive, to look on the bright side of things!"

May I speak frankly? There are a lot of people these days who are trying to "feel good" about themselves that *shouldn't*. Sin makes you feel terrible. You can try to ignore the feelings, or blame shift, or cover up the feelings (with a bottle, or a pill, or illicit sex, or self-esteem techniques), but that's like putting a bandaid on a cancer sore.

Perhaps you feel like the publican. Perhaps you are overwhelmed with feelings of despair and you're wondering, "What should I do?" The answer is this--do what he did. In his confession, he did two things.

1. *He admitted the truth about himself.* "God, be merciful to me *a sinner*." It's so hard for us to admit the truth about ourselves, to say the words, *I am a sinner*. But here's

a man who did. It's a man who had lived a life of blatant sin, and was crushed under the weight of his shame and guilt.

Lest we naively think, "Well, I've never committed any *big* sins," remember this. We have all offended a holy God, and that is the *biggest* sin of all. We were created to live in a right relationship with God, to serve Him. But we've rebelled and gone our own way. We are at His mercy.

Beloved, God delights in the cry of humility! Listen to Isaiah 66:2, "This is what the LORD says...This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." To approach God based on mercy means that we must admit the truth about ourselves. Are you admitting the truth about yourself, as did the publican?

2. *He admitted the truth about his need.* "God, have *mercy* on me." At first, this may sound like a generalized prayer for mercy, such as, "God, I know I've blown it, and you know I've blown it. Would You just overlook it? Would You not give me what I deserve?" The fact is, a holy God can't overlook sin. It must be judged.

The tax collector knew that. He had a need, and admitted the truth about his need to God. He said, "Have *mercy* on me." This particular word for "mercy" is rare, and is found only twice in the New Testament. The Hebrew term *kaffar* lies behind the Greek term *hilaskomai*. A word study reveals that it clearly refers to the atonement sacrifice (see Bailey, 154).

This publican isn't just asking God for mercy, but for mercy that's available only as the result of atonement. He knew he needed an atonement, a covering for his sin. As Schofield says in his footnote, "The Bible knows nothing of divine forgiveness apart from sacrifice."

Why would prompt the tax collector to pray this kind of prayer? Remember something. Where was he standing? In the Temple. What had just happened? The priest had just offered the daily atonement sacrifice. The publican had seen the priest lead the lamb to the slaughter. He could smell the smoke from the sacrificial offering. He could hear the priest's pronouncement of blessing upon the people.

And while all this is happening, the tax collector is there. He's standing far off in the corner of the temple court, overwhelmed with his own unworthiness, yet longing to be a part of it all. He yearns to be righteous, and in deep remorse, he strikes his chest over and over and cries out, "O God! Let it be for me! Make an atonement for me, a sinner!"

Have you ever come to God on those terms? Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? No, we don't come to God through the shed blood of lambs, but through the shed blood of *the* Lamb of God, Jesus Christ!

So what's the point of the story? It's this...

Implications (14): To be right with God, we must trust in His mercy, not our merit.

That's it. Jesus concludes in verse 14, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified by God [i.e. right with God]. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Perhaps you're wondering, "I thought this was a series on forgiveness. What does this parable have to do with forgiveness?" Plenty. When we realize that being right with God is a matter of mercy, not merit, it affects us in three practical ways.

1. *It affects the way we view God.* He's not a God we can impress with our goodness. He's a merciful Father who pardons our badness if we'll trust in His Son.

2. *It affects the way we view ourselves.* We are sinners, every one of us. We don't deserve His favor, but His wrath. We need His mercy. We need His atonement. And we have both in Christ!

3. *It affects the way we view others.* The truth is, we are all in the same boat. We are right with God, not because of our merit, but because of His mercy *alone*. And when you've received mercy from God, it changes the way you view others.

This truth is powerfully illustrated by what happened on death row at the Indiana Penitentiary in 1981. In his book, *Loving God*, Chuck Colson relates the following true account of a Prison Fellowship seminar at the state pen (pp. 192f.). Colson asked the warden to let him and a team of Christian workers visit death row. Things were tense there because Stephen Judy had just been executed, but Colson wanted to see two inmates that had come to know Christ and were corresponding with him.

The warden agreed, and about twenty workers made their way through the maze of concrete cellblocks to the double set of barred doors. On the other side was death row.

Colson writes, "I was especially glad to meet Richard Moore, whose wife had written to me such moving letters, and James Brewer, a young black man who, though seriously ill with a kidney disease, was a powerful witness to the others on death row. Whether his death would come swiftly by several thousand volts of electricity or slowly by uremic poisoning, James was at perfect peace with God and his warm smile showed it."

After a brief service, the group prepared to leave. Colson was on a tight schedule, knowing a plane was waiting at a nearby airstrip to fly him to Indianapolis to meet with Governor Orr. As the group filed out, Colson noticed one volunteer had stayed behind and was with James Brewer in his cell. Mr. Colson went to get the volunteer since the warden could not open the gates until the whole group had cleared out.

Colson tells what happened next.

"I'm sorry, we have to leave," I said, looking nervously at my watch... The volunteer, a short white man in his early fifties, was standing shoulder to shoulder with Brewer. The prisoner was holding his Bible open while the older man appeared to be reading a verse.

"Oh, yes," the volunteer looked up. "Give us a minute, please. This is important," he added softly.

"No, I'm sorry," I snapped. "I can't keep the governor waiting. We must go."

"I understand," the man said, still speaking softly, "but this is important. You see, I'm Judge Clement. I'm the man who sentenced James here to die. But now he's my brother and we want a minute to pray together."

Colson writes, "I stood frozen in the cell doorway. It didn't matter who I kept waiting. Before me were two men: one was powerless, the other powerful; one was black, the other white; one had sentenced the other to death. Anywhere other than the kingdom of God, that inmate might have killed that judge with his bare hands--or wanted to anyway. Now they were one, their faces reflecting an indescribable expression of love as they prayed together..."

What a difference the mercy of God makes! It did for two men praying together on death row. It did in Luke 18 for one of two men praying in the temple. It can for you.

Response:

Let's spend some time pondering our need for God's mercy. Ken will be playing, and while he does, evaluate your view of God, of yourself, and others.

Time for Reflection & Prayer

Ministry in Music: Ken Henry

Being right with God depends entirely on His mercy, not our merit. There's a song that expresses this conviction, and we want to sing it as a closing affirmation...

Hymn of Response: #66 "To God Be the Glory"