

# Parables of Jesus

Message 11

## *How Good do You Have to Be?*

Luke 18:9-14

### ***Introduction***

This passage begins by identifying Jesus' audience. "He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." Throughout Jesus' ministry He talked to a wide variety of people – diverse groups who did not always get along with each other. Here He is specifically zeroing in on a particular set of people – the good people, those who were righteous. They were confident that they were on God's good side. They were the ones the Messiah was coming for – the faithful keepers of the law. None of these people had broken the law by murder, extortion, or adultery – and they had little use for those who had. They never associated with such rebels of society, but spent their lives with others like themselves.

As we begin to examine this parable tonight, where do you fit? Are you one of the righteous people, or are you one of the sinners? It's an important question, because how you answer it will determine the course of your life and your eternal destiny.

### ***Two Men Praying***

The parable opens up immediately by establishing a contrast between two groups of people represented by two men, the Pharisee and the tax collector. Furthermore, they represent two approaches to worship, for they both go up to the temple. Let's look carefully at what the parable says about each one.

First the Pharisee. Now here is a noble individual if there ever was one – a fine, exemplary citizen. He has never been involved in any crimes, and furthermore, he is diligent in his public and religious duties. He fasts not once, but twice each week. Do you know anyone who fasts twice a week? How about once a week? How about once a year? This guy really beats us all, doesn't he? Then he tithes. Studies show that the average giving of American Christians is about 3% of their income – far short of the 10% that constitutes a tithe. If you ever get into a serious discussion of tithing with other Christians, one of the issues that comes up is whether to tithe on your gross income or on your net, after-tax income. That is a legitimate question, but it can be a shield for stinginess. But here is this guy tithing on *everything*. In another place Jesus accused the Pharisees of tithing their garden herbs! Imagine – you want a bit of parsley to garnish your potatoes, so you step outside and snip off a few leaves. But before you sprinkle them on the dish, you count the leaves and set aside one tenth of them for the offering plate. Now that is serious tithing!

So on center stage we have the Pharisee, model citizen, devoted worshiper, praying. Now as we would expect, his prayer is very commendable. It is essentially a prayer of thanksgiving. What do you say when you pray? How thankful are you? If you are like most of us, the bulk of your prayers consist of requests for help. "Lord, get me through this exam!" "God, please help me finish this paper on time!" "Jesus, please show me where the bug is in this program!" And doesn't God often answer your prayers? Sure, God loves to hear and answer our cries for help. But do you then thank Him? Do you immediately pray in thankfulness after your exam, or after you complete the paper, or when you find that bug in your program? Again, if you are like most of us, the answer is no. Your attention is drawn to something else, and you forget to thank God. I know I do. Sometimes later in the day I sheepishly come to God to thank Him for the help He gave when I prayed – and then forgot. Yes, thanksgiving is a small part of our prayers, largely because thankfulness is a small part of our character. But the Pharisee is not like us. He is thankful to God. Is it to

his credit that he is so righteous? No. It is God who made him so good. So in recognition of God's important role in his life, the Pharisee thanks Him.

But notice one final thing about the Pharisee. It says he prayed "with himself". How very odd. It's not as though he was *by* himself, for he was in the temple, a very public place. Of course it is certainly possible that he was involved in a private prayer. Sometimes I go to the chapel here on campus to pray. I am not expecting to join anyone else – it is just a good place to pray. Besides, the tax collector's prayer also was apparently private. So what is the point here? The point is that Jesus apparently meant to indicate something special about the prayer of the Pharisee because He calls attention to this.

At the same time in the temple we have the tax collector. Now you may know that the tax collectors were very great sinners. What's worse, they were traitors. They worked for the Roman government which was universally hated. The taxes they collected helped to pay for the debauchery and idolatry of the Roman state, and to fund the Roman legions that patrolled the cities and towns of Israel. Furthermore, most tax collectors were dishonest, collecting far more than they needed to pay the taxes, and lining their pockets with the wealth they stripped from the poor of the land. Yes, the tax collectors were odious sinners. Apparently the Jews never considered, however, that some of their own heroes had served foreign powers. Remember Joseph, who served Pharaoh in Egypt? Then there were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who served Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. To make matters worse, they were serving in Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar invaded and burned Jerusalem! Then there was Nehemiah, and Esther, and so on. But the fact that these heroes served a foreign power seems to have been forgotten, for the tax collectors were automatically assumed to be sinful due to their association with Rome.

So in the corner we have the tax collector – sinner, traitor, general scoundrel. Now his prayer is exceedingly brief. "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Sure enough, he admits it. Here is a genuine bad guy. He makes no attempt to cover his sins. In fact, the whole content of his prayer is confession of sin. But when we get to the punch line we will see that Jesus approves of this prayer more than the other. After all, we all sin, and God calls us to confess our sin. So let's think about this for a moment. If thanksgiving is in short supply in our prayers, what about confession? How often do you confess your sins to God? Did you today? How about yesterday? Last week? If we tend to forget to thank God for our blessings, don't we even more frequently neglect to confess our sins? Why is this? Why is confession so overlooked in our prayers? If thanksgiving a small part of our prayers because thankfulness is a small part of our character, perhaps confession is neglected because we so seldom see our sin and glibly excuse it when we do.

### ***You and Prayer***

Now that the stage is set with our two players, which one represents you? Are you the righteous servant of God, or the wicked servant of an idolatrous state? Are you a thankful Christian, or a repentant sinner? Do you read your Bible and pray most days, go to church every week, pay your taxes, obey the laws, study for your classes, and refuse to engage in cheating, drunkenness, and fornication? Or do you have sex before marriage? Do you get drunk and cheat and evade your taxes and steal music online? Do you sleep in on Sunday and never take the time to read the Bible? Are you what God calls a sinner? One more question for those of you who are good people: do you despise the sinners? Do they make you angry? Are you happier if they do not come to RUF?

Or are you in a different category – the largely prayerless? Do you remember to pray to God at least once a day? I am not talking about a two hour marathon here, but I mean more than a mumbled petition as you rush to class. Are you by chance worse off than both of these characters because you aren't even in the play?

Furthermore, are you even in the temple? Both of these guys went to the temple to pray. Now that is not the only place you can pray, but Jesus calls attention to the fact that the temple is where they went. There is something special about praying in the temple. You can look in the Old Testament, especially the psalms, and see that God's people longed to pray in the temple. When Daniel was in Babylon, he prayed facing Jerusalem, where the temple was. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., but that doesn't matter, for the New Testament tells us that our temple is the assembly of believers. For example, in Ephesians 2:19-21 we read, "Now, therefore, you are...members of the household of God...a holy temple in the Lord." This means that when we gather together we become a temple of God. That is us here tonight. God is present here in a special way – present in some way that He is not present with you in your room.

In this parable Jesus was talking about two men who went to God's temple to pray. Do you make it your habit to pray regularly in the temple? The early church took this very seriously. You can see in the book of Acts that the apostles and the new believers prayed together every day. This pattern continued throughout the ancient church – as much as possible when they weren't being persecuted! For the past two thousand years God's people have often gathered on a daily basis for prayer. When the Reformation swept the church in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the reformers kept the ancient tradition of daily prayer. In the cities of the reformation services were held every morning and evening. Not everyone could go to every service, but the churches were full. Calvin, Luther, Bucer, Zwingli – the great men of the reformation took turns preaching and leading their cities in prayer every morning and evening.

Are you in the temple? I hope you are in the temple at least once a week on the Lord's Day. I also urge you to join a Bible study here on campus and for prayer to be part of each Bible study. Then there is Noon Prayer every day. Most of you cannot come every day – and I do not expect you to. But you *can* come once or twice a week. I pray for the day when God's people at Lehigh will crave His presence every day – so they will be unwilling to wait a whole week to assemble again for prayer. I pray for God to give us such a hunger for Him that we also join for prayer every day, as the church has throughout the centuries.

### ***God's Perspective***

Now we come to the last verse of the parable where Jesus gives us God's perspective on this little temple drama. Here is the key to the parable, "I tell you, this man [i.e. the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other..." To make sense of this we have to understand that the term "justified" means "to make just, or righteous". It is a legal term. As such it has reference to the law. If you are taken to court, it is because you are accused of breaking some law. If you are justified in court, you are cleared of any wrong-doing. In other words, you are found innocent of the charges. Say you are brought to court for murder. "I didn't do it," you say. "I will be justified by this trial!" Sure enough, as the trial proceeds all the evidence points toward your innocence. Finally you are acquitted of the charges. "At last I have been justified," you say. You kept the law after all, and the trial proved it.

In saying that one of these men was justified, Jesus is saying that one of them was found innocent of breaking God's law. Now which one would you have chosen to be cleared of all charges against God? Certainly not the tax collector. He condemned himself by his own words. The only one who had any kind of a chance at all was the Pharisee. But Jesus says it is the tax collector who was justified! How can Jesus reverse common sense like that? The answer is that neither man was good enough on his own. Both had real sins on their record. The difference was that the tax collector had his erased, while the Pharisee's sins remained.

### ***Justification***

Turn to Romans 3:21-26.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and

the Prophets, <sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, <sup>26</sup> to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:21-26

This passage explains in more detail what Jesus was talking about here. The passage opens by telling us the topic of the paragraph – righteousness apart from the law. This paragraph is going to tell us how we can be righteous without keeping God’s law. It’s like how to keep your driver’s license clear even though you frequently speed. How can we be innocent in God’s sight even though we sin from day to day? Verse 22 tells us it is by attaching ourselves to Jesus’ record. Jesus never sinned, and we can get the credit for His perfect life. It tells us right here how we can do that – by faith in Jesus. In other words, by believing Him, trusting Him. We accept that what He says is true. We agree that He is the son of God, that He died to save us, and that we ought to live as He says. Since we trust Him to tell us the truth, we make consistent efforts to follow through on our new convictions. This is what is meant by faith in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the next verse tells us that this is the *only* way to get on God’s good side. Everyone sins. When mankind is brought to God’s court, everyone is found guilty of breaking His law. That is why there has to be a way to be cleared apart from keeping the law. If doing good was required to be accepted by God, no one would pass. Everyone, the fine citizens as well as the scoundrels, can be accepted by God only if he trusts Jesus.

But isn’t it unjust of God to clear our record simply because we trust in Jesus? If this is a legal situation, how could God miscarry justice by simply overlooking sin like that? The following verses explain this. Jesus is our *propitiation*. This is a fancy word which means “satisfying justice”. In this context it means that Jesus took our place and accepted the punishment due us for our law-breaking. God’s justice was *satisfied* by putting Jesus to death in our place. In this way, as verse 26 says, God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”. In other words, God clears our record, treats us as innocent, and does this without injuring the justice of His court. That is because the punishment is not forgotten – it is delivered, but to Jesus instead of to us. It is a great legal transfer. God moved the credit for Jesus’ perfect life to our record, and moved the punishment due us to Jesus’ record. Jesus died for sins, and we go free as innocent men and women.

### ***The Gospel***

Folks, this is the heart of the gospel. The cruel reality is that all of us, no matter how good we look on the surface, are sinful and deserve to die for breaking God’s law. We are helpless, utterly helpless before God. We have no hope in ourselves, and our doom is certain. Only if Jesus died for us is there any hope of escape from God’s anger and punishment for our sins. The great good news is that Jesus did die for us, and that everyone may escape death by believing in Him! Everyone – rich and poor, smart and dumb, beautiful and ugly – all may be saved by believing in Jesus.

But here is the problem. Not everyone is willing to believe in Jesus. Some think He was a fraud. He claimed to be the Son of God, but some people find that too incredible to accept. He claimed to tell the truth, but some people think parts of His message are false. Particularly tonight’s message. Some people – many, in fact – cannot accept that a slimy tax collector could be welcomed by God. Such a God is offensive to them. Such a salvation is insulting to them. Like the Pharisee, they have spent their whole life toiling to do good. Like the Pharisee, they are pleased with themselves. They are grateful that they are not sinful like

others, and are sure that God admires them as much as they admire themselves. But if He doesn't, they will have nothing to do with such a God and such a Christ. They will keep trusting in their own good deeds, confident that they will enter paradise on their own. What fools! Someday they will wake up to an eternity of misery. Everyday thereafter they will castigate themselves for their stupidity, but it will be too late.

Others are offended by God because He dares to condemn them. They stubbornly insist they can have sex whenever they want with whomever they want. They resent God for denying them the pleasure of drunkenness. They are angry that God requires honesty in classes and paying their taxes. They hate God for accusing them of stealing music online. They refuse to hear the gospel, that God died to save them from this wretched life. They refuse to believe God when He declares that they will perish in hell for their sin. Forgiveness and eternal life are available for the asking, but they refuse to ask. Not all tax collectors received forgiveness from Jesus – only those who repented of their sins. But those who repent have nothing to fear, for Jesus longs to welcome them into His Kingdom.

Are you the Pharisee or the tax collector; the very good person trusting in your own goodness, or the very sinful sinner who admits your sin.? This is a binary question. There are no more than two choices. We started out by observing that Jesus had put humanity into two camps. These are your only choices. There is no third alternative. Although it may pain you to do so, I advise you, I beg you to side with the tax collector. He may be offensive, but he is on the road to eternal life.

### ***Your Response***

If you are a respectable citizen, admit your sin. Confess it every day. Think not about your good deeds, but think about the perfect life of Christ, and how *His* good deeds are on your record now, by faith in Him. If you are not a respectable citizen, if you are painfully aware of your sinfulness, then this is the best news you have heard all day – even all your life. Perhaps you are ashamed of your past, but it does not matter to God. God forgives all your sins when you confess them and trust in Jesus to save you. Don't fear God. Confess your sins and trust Jesus to save you from death.

Finally, all here who have trusted in Jesus are all in the same boat. None of us gained our salvation by our good deeds, or intelligence, or good looks, or heritage. All of us are sinners saved by Jesus. We are all in the same condition. That means none of us have anything to boast about. None of us are any better than any others, and all of us owe our worship to Christ.

Folks, if you have been saved by Jesus, if you have come to see your sin and know you have been saved, you will be so joyful you will praise Him all your life. Jesus will be your great love and passion. He will fill your thoughts and conversation – and you will want to call and welcome your friends and neighbors into this fellowship, too. Let's do that. Let's ask God this week to transform us to be His joyful messengers of salvation. Amen.

C. David Green  
Lehigh University  
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