PARABLES

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector
Luke 18:9-14

This is a well-known parable. The more familiar the parable, the more it needs to be rescued from all the barnacles that have attached to it over the centuries. Often it is taken as a story about pride and humility and a proper attitude to prayer. One man prays an arrogant prayer and is blamed for his attitude. The other prays a humble prayer and is praised for doing so. Often our unconscious response is, *"Thank God I am not like that Pharisee!"* Such a reaction demonstrates that we are just like him!

Yet in this parable there are hidden nuggets of great spiritual truth. The hearers are clearly Pharisees.

The Literary Form

There is an inverted parabolic form set out in 7 stanzas.

The Text

1.	Two men went up to the Temple to pray one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector	Two go up to pray
2.	The Pharisee stood by himself praying	His manner
3.	***"God I thank you because I am not like other men.*** ***extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector.***	His prayer His image of tax collectors
4.	***I fast twice a week*** ***I give tithes of all I possess."***	His self-righteousness
5.	***"But the tax collector, standing far off would not*** ***even lift up his eyes to heaven;***	The reality of the tax collector
6.	***He beat upon his chest saying, 'God make*** ***atonement for me, a sinner'.***	His manner His prayer
7.	***I tell you, he went down to his house*** ***made righteous rather than that one."***	two go down One justified, the other marginalised

Conclusion: ***"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted."***

Two men went up to the Temple. The same two men left the Temple. The Pharisee is mentioned first and then the tax collector. At the end only the tax collector is mentioned. The Pharisee is marginalised and is called "that one".

The exterior manner of both men is mentioned as well as each man's direct address to God indicating each one's self understanding.

In 3 and 4 the focus is on the Pharisee. In stanza 3 the tax collector is seen through the eyes of the Pharisee.

In 5 and 6 the focus is on the tax collector and the reality is very different!

Stanza 4 is the centre: this is the presentation of the case of self-righteousness. This is repeated in 7.

So simply: The two went up.
The Pharisee stood
and prayed.
The tax collector stood
and prayed.
The two went down.

The Pharisee's prayer is five lines long while the prayer of the tax collector is only one line.

The context

Jesus told this parable, ***"To some who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else."***

This almost certainly referred to the Pharisees. They had two characteristics:

- They trusted in themselves.
- They treated others with contempt.

This is an attitude to life that is not uncommon.

The cultural and religious background

A look at the culture and style unlocks the door to great theological content. In the introduction we see that Jesus told this parable, ***"To some who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else."*** So the story is about righteousness – in particular self-righteousness.

What does it mean to be a righteous person? In the Hellenistic World of the listeners to this parable *'dikaios'* (righteous) was the general term that applied to a person who was civilised and observed customs and legal norms. Generally speaking this is what ordinary people mean when they try and describe a 'righteous person'. We would probably use the phrase 'a decent person' of someone who maintains a high standard of morality, obeys the Law etc.

But the Greek New Testament and the teaching of Jesus are deeply rooted in the Old Testament where 'righteousness' is the standard not only for man's relationship to God but for relationships between people.

In the Old Testament 'a righteous person' has nothing to do with the observation of a code of ethics. It is a person who is granted a special relationship of acceptance into the presence of God. It is an unearned status that is demonstrated by acting in loyalty to God who gives the status. So it is God who gives to people the all-embracing gift of righteousness.

See Micah 6:3-5 where the plural of righteousness is translated 'saving acts'. Micah then reflects what would be appropriate in response to God's amazing gift. God's answer is in Micah 6:8:

"To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Jesus was faced with people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. The self-righteous have faith in themselves and in their own power while weaker people must be content to have faith in God as the grounds of righteousness. For the self-righteous, the grounds of their righteousness is their own achievements in piety and morality.

So the theme of the parable is, **'How is righteousness achieved'?** The setting is public worship. The tax collector standing far off implies he is praying away from the rest of the worshippers in the Temple.

As westerners we see prayer as something we do in private. We 'worship' corporately. In Semitic cultures (Hebrew and Arabic) it means both. In the early church there was corporate prayer.

In Acts 2:42 we have a listing of what the early believers did. This includes:

- fellowship
- the breaking of bread
- prayers (corporate prayers)

Acts 16:13-16 speaks of 'a place of prayer'.

This is a case of corporate worship/prayer. So two people go to the Temple to pray. When the service is over both leave to go home. When a Muslim says, "I am on my way to the mosque to pray", everyone knows he is going to a corporate prayer time – one of the five required prayer times.

In the Temple there was morning (dawn) prayer and afternoon (3.00 pm) prayer at which an atoning sacrifice was made. Blood was sprinkled on the altar and worshippers were present to receive the priestly benediction given to the people at the end and to pray privately during the burning of the incense that the officiating priest did at the altar of the holy place.

Usually hymns were chanted by cantors. The morning sacrifice of a lamb was at dawn and a second similar sacrifice of a lamb for the sins of the people was made at 3.00 pm. The time of burning incense was after the sacrifice as the blood of the lamb had covered their sins and so the way to God was open. This was the time for private prayer. See Luke 1:8 for Zechariah's experience.

So in the midst of public worship both the Pharisee and the tax collector prayed a private prayer. Since the tax collector uses the word 'atonement' it was either at the dawn prayer or at 3.00 pm in the afternoon.

First century attitudes

The attitude of the Pharisee

A Pharisee was a precise observer of the Law. A tax collector was a Law-breaker and a traitor to the nation.

The Pharisee's manner: ***" … stood by himself, thus praying … "***

His prayer: ***"God, I thank you because I am not like other men …."***

His manner: Did he stand by himself or did he pray to himself? Most probably the first is correct. Why does he stand apart from the other worshippers? It is because he considered himself righteous and despised the others.

There were two categories of Pharisees:

- ✓ **'The associates'** who kept the Law very strictly
- ✓ **'The people of the land'** who were ignorant of the Law, failed to observe the rules of cleanliness and did not give tithes – the heave offering, the first tithe, the second tithe and poor man's tithe. They were "the great unwashed".

Pharisees could get unclean by sitting, riding or even leaning against something unclean. This included touching the clothes of a 'person of the land'.

This Pharisee made sure he didn't accidentally brush up against someone unclean like the tax collector. His cleanliness was too important to him. Physical isolation was an important statement.

An inter-testamental book – **The Assumption of Moses** – quotes the early Pharisees saying of the Sadducean rulers, "And though their hands and their minds touch unclean things, yet their mouths speak great things and they shall say furthermore, 'Do not touch me lest you should pollute me in the place where I stand …."

The great Jewish rabbi, Hillel, said, "Keep not aloof from the congregation and trust not yourself until the day of your death and do not judge your fellow until you have yourself come to his place."

So in summary, the Pharisee:

- Goes up to the Temple to attend the morning or afternoon sacrifice
- Stands apart from the other worshippers as a gesture of religious superiority
- Almost certainly prays aloud since this was the typical Jewish practice
- Consciously or unconsciously is 'preaching' to the 'less fortunate unwashed'
- They have had little chance to get a look at a truly 'righteous' man like himself so as a bonus he 'graciously' offers them a few words of judgement as well as some instruction in worship.

[Most of us have been obliged to listen to some misguided person insult his neighbours in a public prayer!]

According to the Mishna 'the delegation of Israel' were responsible for making all the 'unclean' stand at the Eastern Gate. So the Pharisee is probably critical that the tax collector has not been evicted by those responsible.

His prayer: for Jewish people this prayer involved:

- confession of sin
- thanks for all God's gifts
- petitions for oneself and for others

This Pharisee does none of these. He doesn't give thanks to God for His gifts and he doesn't petition God for his needs or the needs of others. In reality it isn't prayer at all but self-advertisement!

As the Pharisee proceeds in his prayer it goes from bad to worse – ***"extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector"***. Some translate 'extortioners' as 'rogues' and 'unjust' as 'swindlers'. Obviously the words that the Pharisee chose reflect what people thought of tax collectors.

The tax collectors were rather like tenant farmers in the taxation system of the Roman Empire. Not only were they traitors to their own people, but they were widely known as 'rogues' and 'swindlers'.

The word 'adulterer' was thrown in for good measure (like the older son in Luke 15:30). It tells you something of the mindset of the Pharisee. The search for faults and failures in others does great harm to the critic himself. The Pharisee is tearing up the fabric of his own spirituality.

So speaking in prayer about his own 'righteousness' and wanting to make a comparison with the truly unrighteous he chooses the tax collector. So his prayer becomes a ruthless attack on a stereotype – a public accusation of a fellow worshipper at the high altar in the Temple that is based on preconceived notions formulated by the Pharisee's own 'righteousness'.

"I fast twice a week. I gather tithes of all I possess."

The Pharisees thought of the Law as a garden of flowers. To protect the flowers they opted to build a fence around the Law. They felt obliged to go beyond the requirements of the Law to ensure they broke none of them.

The Mosaic Law only required fasting on the annual Day of Atonement. (Lev. 25:29 and Num. 39:7) Pharisees chose to fast 2 days before and 2 days after each of the three major feasts – i.e. 12 days a year. But this Pharisee fasts two days every week!

In the Old Testament the people were taught by the Mosaic Law to tithe their grain, oil and wine. (Lev. 27:30 and Num. 18:27) The Pharisees had added to this, ***"Whatsoever is used for food and is kept watch over and grows from the soil is liable to tithes."*** This Pharisee goes way beyond this, ***"I tithed all that I possess"***. [Amos had some harsh words for this sort of thing – Amos 4:4.]

People hearing this "ad" would have been impressed by such a high standard of 'righteousness'!

We are all naturally self-righteous. It is a disease of all the descendants of Adam. We all think of ourselves more highly than we ought to do. ***"Many a man proclaims his steadfast goodness …."*** (Prov. 20:16) The only cure for self-righteousness is true self-knowledge. Only the Holy Spirit can enable us to see what is in our own hearts to the point that we cry out with the leper, ***"Unclean, unclean!"*** (Lev. 13:45).

Why was the Pharisee telling God these things? It was because of his concept of God at a subliminal level as a God satisfied with trivialities – abstaining from petty sins and observing rituals. He thought that because he did these things God was obligated to him.

The attitude of the tax collector

Sensing his defiled ceremonial status, the tax collector chooses to stand apart from the other worshippers attending the magnificent Atonement Sacrifice for the sins of the people. The image of the tax collector in the mind of the Pharisee is in sharp contrast to the reality of the broken, humble

man standing far away from the other worshippers because he feels he is not worthy to stand with others before the altar.

His attitude: The accepted posture of worship was to look down and keep your arms crossed against your chest like a servant standing before his master. Muslims go further and bow their faces to the ground. But this tax collector is so distraught over his sin that he beats his chest where his heart is.

In the Middle East generally only women beat their chests and then at particularly tragic funerals of loved ones. You can often see Palestinian women who have seen their children shot or blown up doing this at the child's funeral.

In the Bible the only case of people beating their chests – evidently both men and women – was at the Cross when some of the crowd, deeply upset, beat their chests at the end of the day just after the Lord Jesus had died. (Lk. 23:48) If it requires a scene as distressing as the Crucifixion of Jesus to cause men and women to beat their chests, then clearly the tax collector is deeply distraught!

The only time in the Middle East you see men beat their breasts is in the Shia community at Ashura when there is an annual commemoration of the Martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad, who was killed in battle. [The Shia are followers of Ali the son-in-Law of Muhammad.]

Why did people beat their hearts? The Rabbis taught that the heart was the source of evil longing. Arab Muslims also see the heart as the source of all evil thoughts. So at least the Shia beat themselves as evidence of their pain and anguish that their forebears didn't ride out and accompany Hussein as he went into battle. For a statement of this Middle Eastern attitude see Mt. 15:19.

His prayer: What does the tax collector pray as he engages in this extraordinary act? Some English translations say, ***"God be merciful to me a sinner"***. But the Greek word for mercy is *'eleeó'* and the Greek word here is *'ilastheti'* from *'hileos'* which means 'make atonement'. So what the tax collector is really praying is, ***"O Lord make an atonement for me – a sinner."***

[The Greek word meaning atonement is found in Heb. 2:17 and is a noun in Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:5; 1 Jn. 2:2 and 4:10.]

The tax collector watches the lamb without blemish being sacrificed for the sins of Israel. He listens to the blowing of the silver trumpets and the great clash of symbols and hears the reading of a Psalm and watches the blood splashed on the side of the altar. He sees the priest entering the holy place to offer incense before God. Then shortly afterwards the priest comes out and declares that Israel's sin has been atoned for by the sacrifice of the lamb. The tax collector – quite distraught and beating his chest – stands far off and cries, ***"O Lord make an atonement for me, a sinner!"***

The tax collector stands far off, anxious not to be seen, sensing his unworthiness to stand with the participants. In his brokenness he is longing to be part of it all, longing that he may stand with the righteous. He is acutely aware of his sin and unworthiness with no merit of his own to commend him. He longs that the great atoning sacrifice might apply to him. It does! What was his conception of God? It was that He was a Holy One in whose presence all people need propitiation/atonement. He was also a God of grace and compassion.

Then Jesus says, ***"I tell you, he went down to his house made righteous rather than that one"***. So in going down from the Temple the Pharisee is downgraded from 'the Pharisee' and dismissively called 'that one'. The tax collector is now mentioned first.

For centuries folk in the church have debated whether the sacraments have an automatic effect on the believer irrespective of his spiritual state. Here in this simple parable we already have an answer and the answer is "No".

John's Gospel strengthens the theology of this parable with Jesus' affirmation that He is indeed, ***"The Lamb who takes away the sin of the world".*** Jesus is confirming the atonement sacrifice as the centre of His theology.

The concluding statement at the end of the parable is:

> ***"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,***
> ***and he who humbles himself will be exalted."***

This statement is found in various places – Mt. 18:4; 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 1 Pet. 5:6. It isn't talking about pride and humility in ordinary society, but pride and humility before God. In Scripture God shows compassion to the meek and humble while rejecting the arrogant.

As in so many parables, Jesus speaks about the theme of 'righteousness'. If you don't sense your need of God's grace, it is false righteousness and you are under condemnation. 'Sinners' yearn for God's grace. For Jesus, sin is not primarily a broken law, but a broken relationship with God. The tax collector yearns to accept the gift of God's justification while the Pharisee feels that he has already earned it.

A comparison with Isaiah 66:1-6

In many of His parables, Jesus took a well-known Old Testament story/passage and developed it.

For example:

- Psalm 23 relates to the Parable of the Good Shepherd in Luke 15:4-7.
- The Parable of the Prodigal Son has 51 points of similarity and contrast with the story of Jacob in Genesis 27:1-36:8.
- **The Parable of the Two Builders** in Luke 6:46-49 clearly relates to Isaiah 28:14-18.

So this parable relates to Isaiah 66:1-6. The hero of Isaiah 66 is clearly the person who is, ***"poor and contrite in spirit"*** (v. 2) and who ***"trembles at My Word"***. (v. 5)

Then there is a blistering attack on the person who offers sacrifices. (v. 3-4) Why is this? ***"Because when I*** (God) ***called, no one answered!"*** Anger is triggered by ritual with the Word! This passage in Isaiah was quoted by Stephen at his trial in Acts 7:49-50 and it is referred to in the Sermon on the Mount. (Mt. 5:34-35)

The similarities between the Isaiah passage and this parable:

- Each is set in the Temple.
- Each deals with a person who is shut out.
- In both, the person who is shut out is the hero of the story.
- Both contain arrogant people who shut out others and in so doing think they are serving God.
- Self-righteousness is condemned in both accounts.
- Each mention sacrifices in the Temple.
- Each has a pious man in awe before God – one trembles and the other beats his chest.
- Each has an individual who chooses to do what delights himself rather than choosing what pleases God.
- The sacrifice itself is not enough to be effective without a contrite spirit which is praised in both.
- There is judgement in both.

The contrasts

- Isaiah's language is extremely harsh (v. 4). The parable is much softer. Sometimes this parable is called anti-Jewish. This is never true of Isaiah 66. Jesus is saying that ritual without Word is inadequate.
- In Isaiah's statement the sacrifices are not under attack but rather the inadequacies of the one who makes them since he is failing to obey the Word of God. In the parable only the atonement sacrifice is mentioned.

- Judgement is pronounced in both. The Pharisee is judged directly in that he goes down to his house unjustified. Judgement results from his own failures not from an overt act of God ***"rendering recompense on His enemies"***.

From a look at the similarities and differences it is easy to see that Jesus was an extremely intelligent, metaphorical theologian!

A Summary

Righteousness: a right relationship with God. It is a gift of God that comes through atonement and can't be achieved by just observing the Law. ***"Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; through whom we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand."*** (Rom. 5:1-2)

Atonement: God's grace offered to us through sacrifice can't be received by the worshipper who is arrogant, judgemental and self-satisfied – i.e. self-righteous!

A Pattern for Prayer: Telling God of all ones 'virtues' in a self-congratulatory way is not prayer! Humble yearning for God's unearned grace is a vital aspect of genuine prayer.

Paul knew this lesson well. In 2 Corinthians 11:7 he wrote, ***"Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the Gospel of God to you free of charge?"***

Peter also knew this well, ***"Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand that He may lift you up in due time."*** (1 Peter 5:6)

Keeping the Law: Achieving a standard beyond the demands of the Law does not secure righteousness.

The Perversion of Perception: Self-righteousness distorts visions of self, God and one's neighbours.

Receiving the elements of Communion: Only those who sense their unworthiness in the presence of God's offered grace can approach God's holiness and so appropriately receive that grace.

The critical link between Word and ritual: in Isaiah 66:1-6 hearing the voice of God and obedience to that voice is the link to ritual. When the Word and ritual are separated or one or the other is neglected very serious problems result.

Each one of us should examine ourselves as we come into God's presence to pray. Where are we? I can't tell you! You know!