

Faulty Comparisons

Luke 18:9-14

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

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.’

¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Allegedly, when comparing the computer and auto industries, Bill Gates stated, “If GM had kept up with technology like the computer industry has, we would all be driving \$25 cars that got 1,000 miles per gallon.” General Motors responded to Gates by releasing the statement, “Yes, but would you want your car to crash twice a day?” Comparisons should be drawn cautiously.

The first parsonage we lived in was definitely at its best in the spring and summer. With a green lawn, red-bud trees in bloom and a bright Oklahoma sun bouncing off that old asbestos siding, the house looked radiantly white. However, on those rare occasions when snow falls in southwest Oklahoma, that house seemed a drab gray when juxtaposed against the pristine whiteness of snowy groundcover.

Any comparison is only as good as the standard of comparison used. If a sinner compares himself with a fellow-sinner, what does he learn? Next to a very good man, I may appear reprobate, but alongside some conspicuous villain, I should look like a pretty nice guy. The reality of sin is that we “all fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). God’s holiness shows every man to be just one shade or another of sinner. This is a painful reality to behold, but a necessary one for understanding grace, for it is the standard of God’s perfect righteousness that reveals our need for His grace and forgiveness..

This familiar parable of Jesus describes two men. One viewed himself as righteous by human standards. The other trembled at the unrighteousness revealed in him as he considers the holiness of God.

I. Understanding this Prayerful Pair

A. Pharisees Were the Standard Bearers of Human Righteousness

The Pharisees came into existence in the period between the Testaments. Greek paganism was rapidly advancing over the earth. The Jewish priesthood had become religiously liberal and ethically corrupt. The masses were too ignorant of Mosaic Law to discern what a mess the religious life of the nation had become. Pharisaism provided a valid home for those who desired to live pure lives in an impure world.

Any virtue to Pharisaism soon degenerated into an obnoxious self-righteousness secured by observing not only Moses but also all sorts of cumbersome rituals that the Pharisees made up themselves. Normal working folk, who were too busy to stay up with pharisaic demands, were dubbed “the people of the land.” Eventually, for a Pharisee to associate with the “people of the land” was to defile himself. Pharisaism was attractive to the wealthy class. They saw their riches as an evidence of God’s special favor. Pharisees had to be independently wealthy to stay on top of their cumbersome, time-consuming rituals, each of which demanded precise procedures that if deviated from, spelled grievous sin.

Among the ranks of the Pharisees were many rabbis, which gave the group an access to the scriptures not available to the people of the land. They abused this privilege, creating legal codes that bound the people in the fear of accidentally sinning, while creating exceptions for themselves. They defined how far others could travel from their homes on a Sabbath day, but they invented ways to expand those boundaries for themselves. At the limit of a legal Sabbath day's journey, they might bury a lunch in the ground, say a little prayer and declare the spot a homestead. Then, they were on their way again.

We might suspect the Pharisee in Jesus' parable to be a bit of a caricature, but he was not. Many Pharisees were genuinely self-deluded about their righteousness as evidenced by these real prayers:

“I thank, Thee, O Eternal, my God, for having given me part with those who attend this school instead of running through the shops. I rise early like them, but it is to study the Law, not for futile ends. I take trouble as they do, but I shall be rewarded, and they will not. We run alike, but I for the future life, while they will only arrive at the pit of destruction.” - prayed daily by Rabbi Nechounia ben Hakana

“If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he.” - Rabbi Simeon ben Jocai

As audacious as this Pharisee's prayer seems, it was not far-fetched. He was quite sure of himself.

B. Tax Collectors Were the Epitome of Human Iniquity

Rome taxed its provinces heavily. Ten percent of the value of all agricultural products went to the government. Remember, the temple already collected this amount from the Jews as a tithe. There were also heavy taxes on imports and exports as well as tolls for crossing bridges and entering walled cities. There was even a 1% census tax, such as the one that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. It was levied for the mere privilege of existing under Roman rule.

Understandably, tax collectors, or publicans, were not embraced with the same warm, fuzzy affection that we feel for our modern IRS. People hated tax collectors. A tax collector was typically a native of a region, who was contracted by Rome to collect taxes for that region. Jewish nationalism was such that a tax collector was considered a traitor as well as a nuisance.

Tax collectors were also despised because the tax system lent itself to corruption. Rome contracted a publican to raise a specific amount of revenue from his region. His compensation was anything he raised or gouged from people over that amount. Many were loan sharks. They could stop a merchant, search his cart and tax whatever needed to be taxed. If a man lacked the means to pay, a publican might loan him the money on the spot. Of course, the interest on such loans was usually exorbitant.

We cannot relate to the original impact of this parable. Years of Bible teaching have taught us to think of a Pharisee as a phony, hypocritical blowhard. But, among the Jews, righteousness equaled religious activity, so Pharisees were regarded as quite respectable. But, there wasn't anything respectable about tax collectors. The term “tax collectors and sinners” described the sinful riff-raff of the day. Jesus' selection of a tax collector as one of His closest disciples was provocative. But, Jesus would show that in God's eyes, Pharisees were not really that righteous and publicans were not really that hopeless.

II. Surpassing this Pompous Pharisee

The Pharisees were respected, so the following words of Jesus from His *Sermon on the Mount* were a bit surprising: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). What did it mean to Jesus' listeners to be called to surpass the highest standard of righteousness they knew?

A. Pharisaic Righteousness Was a Showy Righteousness

A preacher hosted a college student and the girl he was dating for Sunday lunch. The preacher offered to take the young man's coat, but he hem-hawed around, as if he didn't want to do it. Finally, he reminded the preacher of an old trick he had used himself in college. "The only parts of my shirt I ironed were the cuffs and the collar." He had pressed just the parts that showed. The rest of the shirt looked as if he had ironed it with a weed-eater! That was the way of the Pharisees: the part people could see looked great, but the greater reality remained was a mess.

Three daily prayer times were observed by devout Jews; 9 AM, 12 PM and 3 PM. At this particular prayer time, our Pharisee was at the temple. One thing we can bank on was that when prayer time rolled around, he would be in ear-shot of a crowd. Pharisees made public displays of their prayers. Jesus was alluding to their ostentatious prayers when He taught His disciples to go into a room and close the door to pray. The Pharisees showcased all their religious activities. They whitened their faces and wore frumpy clothing when they fasted. They gave their offerings with great fanfare. Jesus once said they did these things to be seen by men, and when men saw them, that was their reward in full.

The Pharisee referenced all of these things in his prayer: "I fast, I tithe!" The Law required one national fast per year, the Day of Atonement, but many Pharisees fasted conspicuously every Monday and Thursday, which also just happened to be markets days when they could play to large crowds. Moses required 10% of the land's produce. Pharisees tithed on their garden herbs. Sometimes, they were so busy showcasing their generosity that they might overlook basic moral duties such as the care of their own parents:

⁹And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"¹⁰For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother," and, "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death."¹¹But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: "Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban" (that is, a gift devoted to God),¹²then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.¹³Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." – Mark 7:9-13

B. Pharisaic Righteousness Was a Relative Righteousness

Jesus told this story to those who were "confident of their own righteousness" (verse 9). "Confident" means a settled conclusion reached by careful reasoning. Some people actually think their way to self-righteousness. They consider the bad people they are better than and the OK people they are as good as. They never engage in gross sin, so they conclude that they are relatively fine folk. One side-effect of such rationale is also stated in verse 9: they "... looked down on everybody else ..."

But, again, this creates a problem. If a sinner only measures himself by other sinners, can he ever know if he is truly pure? Purity can only be accurately judged against an absolutely pure standard. God alone is that standard. Too many people today judge themselves to be safe only because so many others are worse. Who is truly righteous? "There is no one righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:10).

C. Pharisaic Righteousness Was a Self-Sufficient Righteousness

Where there is no sense of sin, there can be no sense of need for God. Consider the Pharisee's prayer. "I thank you that I am not like other men." There is no plea for forgiveness, provision or even direction. The text says he prayed "about" himself. The word could mean he was praying "toward" himself. He obviously was not sensing any kind of holy ground upon which He was standing. He was boasting of his merits in the earshot of a crowd and he suspected that God agreed with his self-assessment.

Everything he said about his fine deeds was probably true. The end result, however, was that after he prayed, he was in a more perilous predicament than any robber, evildoer or adulterer to whom he compared himself. Clearly despicable characters have a potential for sainthood. This Pharisee was too blind to see His need for God's forgiveness. That's as treacherous as life gets. He compared himself to one particularly sinful tax collector. Jesus also compared the two men, but drew a different conclusion.

III. Imitating this Pitiful Publican

Jesus often spoke of a condition of the heart that absolutely must accompany every man's turning to God. The publican illustrates it. The condition is described in Jesus' first four *Beatitudes*:

³Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. – Matthew 5:3-6

A. This Publican Was Spiritually Poor

I remember seeing a cartoon with a preacher beginning his message by saying, "My sermon today is on humility and in my opinion, it's one of the finest pieces ever written." Supposedly, another preacher wrote a book entitled, *The Ten Most Humble Men in the World and How I Chose the Other Nine*. Spiritual poverty is easily counterfeited for show, but God looks for the real thing.

Our tax collector prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (verse 13). The text actually says "the" sinner. He saw himself in the light of God's purity, so it really didn't matter to him how he measured up against other people. I cannot help but think of the Apostle Paul's self-image in this regard. I think of Ahab, Jezebel and Manasseh from the Old Testament as well as of Herod and Barabbas from the New Testament and find it hard to believe that Paul was ever the worst sinner on the face of the earth. Still, he considered himself as the worst of all sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Like Paul, this publican did not bother himself with comparisons to other people. His personal need for grace overwhelmed him.

B. This Publican Mourned His Estrangement from God

At Jesus' crucifixion, when the people realized the innocence of the Man they had executed; "... they **beat their breasts** and went away (Luke 23:48). Jeremiah depicted Israel's national repentance after the captivity this way: 'You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God. After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I **beat my breast**. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth' (Jeremiah 31:18, 19). This publican "beat his breast." This gesture always expressed deep, mournful guilt over sin. He was too wicked for God's holy presence, and the alienation was horrifying.

C. This Publican Approached God in Meekness

The Pharisee stood up and prayed. In contrast, the tax collector cowered "... at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven." Meekness is the humility that understands that God owes a sinner nothing. In meekness, I present my flawed self to God, surrendering my preferred outcome for every predicament over to whatever perfect remedy He has in mind. I surrender the control of the relationship itself over to Him, falling simply on His grace.

D. This Publican Yearned after God

In the fourth beatitude, "hunger" and "thirst" are very intense words. It is not enough to be a "spiritual seeker" if there really is any such thing. After all, any yearning you have right now for God, for a higher life or for inner peace may very well be Christ's activity of drawing you to Himself. But, in any event, it is not enough that one hankers for God. The man who sees his spiritual emptiness hungers and thirsts for God's righteousness like a man on the brink of starvation. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ..." for they alone can cry out, "God, be merciful to me, **the** sinner!"

Throughout His ministry, Jesus' kind treatment of sinners and social outcasts perplexed those who thought that they understood all matters of faith and of pleasing God. This parable explains everything. Grace is most precious to him who sees his own sin and his own need for grace most clearly.

There are times when it is good to thank God that He has helped us to protect our righteousness. There may be times, when hurting or when seeking direction, to remind God that we have done all we can do in a matter. On the other hand, there are times when a prayer filled with cries of repentance and brokenness may evaporate into thin air and never be heard by God because the cries are showy or mere formula that does not reflect a truly broken heart. This Pharisee and this tax collector could have exchanged significant parts of their prayers, and the same one would have still gone home justified and not the other. This is because coming to God is not about words, but about a spirit broken before God.

Does God's holiness compel you to surrender yourself to Him? Jesus concludes His story, saying, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled ..." (verse 14). If you cannot see your moral smallness, it is only because you are looking to someone besides God. One day, He will forcefully open your eyes. But, Jesus adds, "... he who humbles himself will be exalted." If you will measure yourself by the perfect standard of Christ Himself, you will see clearly. It won't be pretty. You will find that you are a dirty little sinner with no option but to cry out for mercy. You will humble yourself. Nothing else will make sense. But, when you do, He will fill you with Himself and raise you to a place of honor.