

Humble Contrition

Luke 18: 9-14 (October 23, 2022)

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⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Historical Context

The Pharisees of the first century were a Jewish movement that emphasized the importance of obedience to the law of Moses. Living in accordance with torah was a way of making God’s benefits visible and accessible in all aspects of life for all who were Jewish. The Pharisees’ attention to things like rituals for cleansing one’s body or one’s cookware was part of a larger effort to encounter God’s holiness in everyday life. Pharisaic priorities aligned with the notion of Israel as a holy (“set apart”) nation, even while in the first century Jews were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world. Pharisees’ emphasis on interpreting the law and developing “oral torah” as practical guidelines for law observance, helps explain why Jesus has so much interaction with Pharisees in the gospels and participated in critical intra-Jewish debates about how exactly Jewish values should express themselves in a changing cultural landscape.

Theme: Humble Contrition

There is a lot going on in this little parable. There are differences between the Pharisee and the tax collector in terms of how they stand and how they pray. The greatest difference is that one has written off the other, while the other can speak only of his own brokenness.

Whenever we want to be critical of one of the characters or distinguish ourselves and our values clearly from one of them, the parable exposes the disdain we harbor. What is disdain? It is the manifestation of a belief that we know better than God who should receive mercy and how they should receive it.

The parable makes its point by using two caricatures: Luke tells an ancient audience composed of Christ-followers that “one of us” knows better. But the parable is not *about* those caricatures. Instead, it is a parable about the humble contrition God desires versus the arrogance that poisons a life of faith and service.

All kinds of people—whether publicans, Pharisees, pastors, parishioners, or politicians, - are capable of either contrition or contempt. Those attitudes express themselves in how we view our neighbors and in the theologies we rely upon to guide our daily lives.

Don’t mistake the polemical caricatures for the parable’s more powerful message. Listen to Jesus’ story and ask: How shall *we* pray to a wildly merciful God? How shall *we* live, having learned of such boundless mercy?