

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 11

Parable of the Pharisee and Publican – Luke 18:9-14

The Pharisee and publican entered the temple one day for apparently similar reasons, but the two were praying very differently. Let's discover the differences in how people pray and the results that occur.

Setting for the Parable

This parable was spoken immediately after the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8). These two parables definitely belong together. The message from the first parable is that a person should always pray with the right attitude and pray without giving up hope. The parable we're studying today is concerned with how we view ourselves before God and why our prayers are heard by God.

Jesus was teaching directly to a group of hypocrites at this point in time. Luke made that clear by the way in which he introduced them (Luke 18:9). Jesus' Pharisee and publican parable is a fictional story...not a real circumstance. But it was told to address a very real problem...the ultimate effects of self-righteousness.

The Pharisees had become self-righteous because they built up a moral standard for themselves based on the sinful actions of others compared their own works.

These judgmental hypocrites totally discount good in others and totally discount bad in themselves. So the Pharisees thought these other people amounted to nothing.

Telling of the Parable

The Pharisee and publican parable was a shocking story to those listening. Jesus turned the public's view of these two men upside down. Jesus exposed the two men for who they really were in God's eyes.

He starts by sharing the Pharisee's prayer. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

Jesus then shares that the publican stood far back in the temple and couldn't even look up to heaven as he prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

He then tells them in no uncertain terms that one of the men went home justified and the other did not. Let's look and find out why.

Meaning of the Parable

To help us really understand this parable, it's important to know the difference between the Pharisee and the publican. It's the contrast between them that is important here...one a religious man...one a sinner man.

The Pharisees were those who learned, lived and taught Judaism. They took great pride in observing the more than 600 laws of God, as interpreted by them. The Pharisees were self-righteous by virtue of building themselves up, while tearing others down. They were bad people who pretended to be saints.

By contrast, publicans were looked down on by society. They were essentially the Roman IRS. And not only did they collect the various taxes demanded by the Romans but they also collected much more than they should because that's how they were paid. They were greedy men who forced financial hardship on the people.

This contrast of persons is what makes this story a shock to the listeners. To think this horrible sinner would be justified while the upstanding Pharisee was not didn't make sense to them. With that said let's take a closer look at the prayers of these two men.

Breaking down the Pharisee's prayer is fairly easy. The Pharisee was offering this prayer of thanksgiving for how great a man he was. He had a very high view of himself. He was comparing his life to the life of "bad" sinners...basically congratulating himself in the process. The wording here actually describes him as praying to himself. In other words, he began the prayer with the word "God" but then spoke with himself. Jesus pointed this out because God doesn't answer the prayers of hypocrites (Matthew 6:5-8). So when a hypocrite prays, no one is listening and the result is that he talks to himself.

The Pharisees' prayer was also mean-spirited. In front of the publican, he audibly thanked God that he wasn't as despicable as the other man. He also had to inform all the hearers in the temple how great his deeds were. He fasted twice per week even though the law only called for fasting once per year. He added that he also pays tithes on everything that enters his house, not simply on his salary. The Pharisee thought everyone needed to know how spiritual he was.

Now let's contrast this with the publican's prayer. The publican didn't even look up to heaven out of respect for God. He realized his utter sinfulness compared to a holy, righteous God. His personal shame, resulting from the guilt of his sin caused him to beat on his chest. Jesus painted the picture of a truly penitent soul.

The Pharisee came to the Temple to boast to other people while the publican came to meet God and pour out his heart in repentance. The Pharisee revealed a heart full of pride while the publican revealed a heart full of humility.

The parable then finds Jesus issuing judgment.

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This verse is really where it all comes together.

The repentant sinner...the publican...receives forgiveness. The unrepentant, hypocrite...the Pharisee ...receives nothing but his own praise. Both the Pharisee and the publican received what they sought. Which is important to you?

In the end, all that matters is how God sees us. He'll either see you as the Pharisee or the publican... justified or guilty.

Because of his humility in coming to God by repentance and faith, this publican stands perfectly righteous before God. The perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was applied to his life. This act is called imputation and fulfills a person's need of atonement with God. And when Jesus' life is imputed to a sinner, the Holy Spirit indwells that person, sealing their soul for the day of redemption.

Get This!

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You cannot truly love God, or other people, or your church with a hypocritical attitude. The love is blocked by a wall you cannot see. You can't love if you judge and condemn others. Stop looking at other people's shortcomings and do something about your own spiritual walk.

Remember that as Christians we are all just sinners saved by God's grace.