

## ***The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector —***

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**Text: Luke 18:9-14**

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When you were a child, what was your image of God? Take a moment to really consider that question. Did you picture God as a Santa Claus figure – who was there to grant your wishes – *if* you’ve been good enough? Or did you think of God like a wizard, perhaps like Gandalf from the Lord of the Rings – someone able to perform amazing magic-type tricks? Or did you envision an angry father just waiting to punish you for the smallest mistake? Maybe God was a kind grandfather or grandmother figure – who always had your favorite foods on the stovetop.

I wonder if our images of God have progressed very far from those first images we had as a child. How do you see God now? Our intellectual descriptions of God as adults may include all-knowing, all-powerful and/or all-present. We may describe God as love and merciful. Some may describe God as judge and jury. If we took a poll of the people in this room, we would probably come up with these images as well as many others.

What about the characters in today's parable? If you have heard this story in the past, you / we may have preconceived notions about these characters based on the things we have been told about them. We often see the Pharisee as a caricature of the reality of most of the Pharisees. Yes, they are described in the Gospels as trying to trick Jesus into doing or saying the wrong thing. But, what if we see them, or at least some of them, how they really were?

Pharisees strove to uphold the law. In fact, Pharisees worked to set themselves apart through their strict adherence to the law. Professor Matt Skinner from Luther Seminary suggests that the Pharisees, "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."<sup>i</sup> They were by all accounts "righteous."

And what about the Tax Collectors – what image do we have of them? We might think of slimy used-car salesmen. People out to rob you blind. It is true that tax collectors were seen as sinners and traitors. In Judea, for the most part, the tax collectors were Jews who had entered into a contract with the Roman Government to collect the taxes from the people – and anything collected over what was required in the

contract was theirs to keep. They were not known for their ethical standards.

We have our images before us. We have our image of God (both from when we were a child and now), we have our image of Pharisees (both the caricature and a possibly more realistic view) and our image of tax collectors.

What happens in today's parable? What is the surprise – especially for the people who first heard this parable from Jesus? The first hearers of this story probably expected Jesus to praise the Pharisee, because he was righteous by the religious standards of the day. They also probably expected Jesus to heap onto the criticism that the tax collector was giving to himself – admitting that he was a sinner.

The prayer that the Pharisee utters is very similar in tone to the morning prayers that were seen in the Jewish faith around the time of Jesus. The most famous (or infamous) of these is the prayer that contains the Three Blessings, “Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me...’ and conclude, respectively, ‘a goy [Gentile],’ ‘a slave,’ and ‘a woman.’”<sup>ii</sup> The people hearing this story for the first time, would have thought verses 11-12 to be a reasonable prayer for the Pharisee to make.

<sup>11</sup> The 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. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’<sup>iii</sup>

The tax collector, in contrast to the Pharisee has not lived a righteous life. He doesn’t even try to hide that from God. In verse 13, we are simply told, “<sup>13</sup> But 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!’”

The surprise comes in the very next verse. The people sitting around Jesus think they know the “rest of the story” and Jesus declares, “<sup>14</sup> I 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.”

What? Wait a minute? Jesus, surely you have this backwards. But he doesn’t.

Many of the authors I read this week all cautioned the same thing in reading, interpreting and preaching on this text. That is, that we do not fall into the trap of being just like the Pharisee. Pastor David Lose in particular put it like this,

we might as well end up preaching, "Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to Scripture, and we have learned that we should always be humble.<sup>iv</sup>

How do we avoid being simplistic in our application of this parable in our own lives? How do we avoid the trap of being just like the Pharisee?

I'd like to ask you to return to the images of God we thought about at the beginning of this sermon. Do you think that the image of God that the Pharisee and the Tax Collector had might have influenced how they prayed? Do you think that the image of God that you have in your mind and in your heart might influence how you pray?

There is no right or wrong answers to these questions. The text doesn't give us that insight. I wonder, however, if our internal images of God affect how we go about our prayer life.

I've told this story to a couple of people in Sunday School or maybe on Monday nights, but when I was younger I really struggled with the need for prayer. I had been taught that God is all-knowing and all-

powerful. So I wondered what the point of prayer really was. I mean if God is all-knowing couldn't I just say, "Hey God, you know, right? Thanks." And I would be done with it. I had missed the image of God as a concerned parent wanting to hear about my day from me. I had missed the image of God as love and mercy – wanting to give grace to me but should I ask for it.

Our images and descriptions of God are an attempt at understanding something that we really cannot understand, much less put into words.

How do you think the Pharisee saw God? Is it possible that the Pharisee saw God as a task-master? Someone who is checking off the list of good deeds to know who to give his blessings to? Maybe the Pharisee thought that was the best way to please God, by keeping the very laws that God gave to Moses on the mountain so long ago?

What about the Tax Collector? What image of God might have been in his head as he prayed? Was he worried that God was a harsh judge that demanded confession to prevent being struck down? Or was he aware that God, as we are told by John, is in fact Love? And that confessing our sins is necessary to enter into the presence of a holy God?

In addition to our images of God, there is one more element that we need to consider in our thoughts about the prayers of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (and maybe regarding our own prayers). Pastor David Lose suggested in talking about the Pharisee that

It isn't that the Pharisee is speaking falsely, but rather that *the Pharisee misses the true nature of his blessing*. As Luke states in his introductory sentence, he has trusted in himself. His prayer of gratitude may be spoken to the Lord, but it is really about himself. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own actions and being.<sup>v</sup>

You might say that the Pharisee's image of God was one of a being that was unnecessary. Perhaps he saw God as not really playing a role in his day to day life. He had his list of things to do and not to do to make God happy. So maybe he was happy with himself.

The picture of the Tax Collector on the other hand, is perhaps a picture of a person recognizing their utter dependence on God for every moment of their life.

How do you picture God this morning? What image of God resonates most clearly with you today? Is God a far off ruler with little concern for our day to day life?

Is God a concerned parent, wanting to offer advice and love to their child? Are you happy with who you are or are you a person that is recognizing your utter dependence on God for every moment of your life? How do those images affect how you may pray today and going forward?

Let us all consider that as we pray.

Lord, teach us to offer you a heart of thanksgiving and praise in all our daily experiences of life.

Teach us to be joyful always, to pray continually and to give thanks in all our circumstances.

We long to bring pleasure to Your heart daily.

Break the power of evil in our lives.

Change our outlooks and attitudes into ones of joy.

We thank You for all that you do for us and pray that we will continue to grow in our knowledge of and love for you. Amen.

This content was adapted from "[A Prayer for a Thankful Heart](#)" by Debbie Przybylski.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4206](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4206)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/three-blessings/>

<sup>iii</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the [New Revised Standard Version](#) (NRSV). New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2967](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2967)

<sup>v</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2967](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2967)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/5-prayers-and-15-verses-to-express-gratitude.html>