

“Have Mercy”
Luke 18:9-14
January 17, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

There are times when it is difficult to discern the main point of a particular passage of Scripture, but this is not one of those times. Jesus is explicit in telling us the point of this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted”** (v. 14). Jesus also explains the precise meaning of being humbled and exalted. The one who was exalted, the tax collector, **“went down to his house justified, rather than the other”** (v. 14). To be humbled by God here means nothing less than to be barred from heaven, and to be exalted means to be justified. In other words, Jesus is saying that in the kingdom of God the humble are in and the proud are out.

We are in our second week of our series on the gospel-centered life, and this passage takes us to the very heart of the matter. To be gospel-centered is to be like the tax-collector and not the Pharisee. Everything of any lasting value, both in this life and the life to come, hinges upon the question of whether or not we have the humility of the tax collector. So let’s look at this parable more carefully, noting what it says about pride and humility.

I. The Surprising Examples of Pride and Humility

Suppose Jesus began his teaching like this. “I want to ask you a question about who gets in to the kingdom of God and who is excluded. Of these two people, a Pharisee and a tax collector, which one would you say gets in?” All of his hearers would have given the same answer. This would be to them a very easy question. Of course, the Pharisee would get in and the tax collector would be excluded. Since we know the parable so well, we have lost the shocking nature of Jesus’ conclusion that the tax collector makes it into the kingdom and the Pharisee gets excluded.

Jesus’ hearers would be shocked to hear that the Pharisee gets excluded. If the average first century Jew had been asked to rank those most likely to get into heaven, the Pharisees would be number one on everyone’s list. The highest among all the others would be a distant second. Pharisees were known for their zeal to obey the laws of the Old Testament. Theirs was not an ignorant zeal, for they were well-educated. They had studied the Old Testament and seen the connection between Israel’s obedience and God’s blessing of their land. They loved their nation and wanted God to restore its fortunes. They believed their part in this was to lead the nation into a revival of faithful obedience. They

became scrupulous in obeying every part of the law, even nailing down the precise practices required when the Mosaic Law was a little vague. For example, there were certain Old Testament laws regarding washing. The Pharisees amplified that to describe the precise way to conduct these washings. They specified such things as the minimum volume of water to be used, how many times the hands were to be rinsed, and even requiring that the fist of one hand was to be used to wash the other. As we can see from his prayer in this passage, they exceeded the requirements of the law. He fasted twice a week, though the Old Testament required only one annual fast on the Day of Atonement. He tithed everything that came into his possession. So, for example, when he would purchase something at the market, he would tithe what he purchased, essentially paying the tithe on it twice. The general population looked in awe to the Pharisees for their high level of obedience.

There was also general agreement among the Jews about the tax collectors. Everyone agreed that they were the worst of the worst as sinners. Remember that Israel was an occupied nation. Their conquerors, the mighty Romans, levied heavy taxes upon each colony, with the result that the wealth of all these nations poured into the hands of the Roman citizens. The tax collectors in Israel, however, would not have been Romans, but Jews. They were required to get a certain amount of revenue from the citizens in their tax district, and turn it over to Rome. For rendering this service to Rome, they were paid absolutely nothing by the Romans. But it is a well-known fact that the tax collectors were among the wealthiest of all citizens. How did they get their money if the Romans paid them nothing? The answer is that they were allowed to collect far more than the tax revenue required by Rome, and to keep the difference. And if someone didn't want to pay their taxes, the tax collector was backed up by the Roman army. It's not hard to imagine why these tax collectors would be among the most despised Jews in the nation. They were exceptionally rich, in comparison with the general level of poverty that was so widespread in Israel. Second, they were viewed as traitors, Jewish men collaborating with their Roman occupiers. Third, their work amounted to what would be termed extortion today.

It will help us to see the shocking nature of Jesus' parable by thinking of the nearest parallels in our own society to the tax collector and the Pharisee. The tax collector would be like a drug lord, enriching himself without a care for the lives of those being destroyed in the process. The Pharisee would be like a well-respected businessman who serves as an elder in his church. The surprising conclusion of the parable is that the church elder is left standing on the outside of the kingdom, while the drug lord has become an insider. Their insider and outsider status has nothing to do with their roles of businessman and drug lord, but is due instead to the pride of the one and the humility of the other. So let's look more carefully at their pride and humility, noting the marks of each.

II. The Marks of Pride and Humility

Jesus highlights the pride and humility of each of these two men by allowing us to listen in on their prayers. You can tell a great deal about people by the way they pray because our praying provides a window into our hearts. Did you notice that the text says that he prayed **“to himself”**? The ESV translation actually has this phrase modify the verb, so that he is standing by himself. But I think the footnote provides a better translation in indicating that he is praying to himself. In other words, he is speaking inaudibly because he doesn't want others to hear him. Sometimes when we pray while others are listening, we will think more than we should about how they will react to our prayers. But when no one is listening except God, our prayers will indicate what is truly in our hearts. For example, the person who doesn't pray at all doesn't believe God's promise to hear and answer prayer.

What do we see about the hearts of these two men as they pray? The heart of the Pharisee is indicated by the five occurrences of the pronoun *I* in his prayer. His prayer is thoroughly self-centered. He starts well with the normal formula of a thanksgiving prayer, “God, I thank you.” But everything after that is transparently self-centered. It is as if he is congratulating God for making such an excellent choice in choosing someone like him to be on God's team. His prayer is full of self, while the tax collector's prayer is full of God. So the first mark of pride and humility is self-centered praying versus God-centered praying.

How about your praying? The prayers of the proud are full of self. There is a self-centered agenda that wants God to get on my page, instead of asking God to help us get on his page. Such prayers try to manipulate God to get him to do what we want him to do. This kind of praying doesn't bring us close to God, simply because God is viewed as a tool that we use, rather than a person to whom we make appeal. The tax collector's prayer is full of God. He has begun with a deep sense of his sin and knows that the only solution to his problem can be found in God's mercy. He is like a pastor friend of mine who told me once of a time in his younger years when he was rock climbing. We were in a group together talking about times when we each thought we might die. My friend got stuck on a high, narrow rock ledge in which he could go neither forward nor backward. He had only a tenuous grip on the ledge, with nothing much more than a toehold and a fingertip grasp. He had a friend with him who went for help. But they were a long distance from any help, and it took a long time for the help to arrive. As the shadows lengthened, day turned to dusk and then to darkness, and still his friend had not returned with help. He wasn't sure how much longer he was going to be able to hold on. Knowing that his only hope was with the help brought by his friend, he strained his eyes and ears to catch any sign of their arrival. A whole group of rescuers did eventually arrive late into the night, and after much effort were able to help him off the

ledge. The tax collector looked for God in the same way that my friend looked for his rescuers. The humble pray with that kind of fervency, knowing that God is our only hope.

A second mark of humility and pride is that the proud look down on others, while the humble do not. The Pharisee saw himself as better than others. He names several groups—extortioners, the unjust, adulterers and tax collectors. This is made explicit in the introduction to the parable, where the author tells us that Jesus told this parable to those **“who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt”** (v. 9). The proud have a sense of superiority over others. Since we don’t see pride in ourselves very easily, it is a big help to us to have this clue. Are there types of people you look down on? If so, that is a sure indicator of pride. I tend to look down on those whom I perceive as not working very hard. Someone else might look down on those who lack a certain level of education, or who they see as beneath them in social status. Ironically, many today look down on those who hold to a traditional morality. This is the exact opposite of the situation in Jesus’ parable where the one with the traditional morality looks down on the sinner. Now the sinner looks down on the one with traditional morality. In both cases, the one guilty of such contempt does so because of pride.

The third mark of pride and humility is that the humble are marked by a conviction of sin. The tax collector prayed, **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”** Literally, he says, *the sinner*. His sin was so large in his own eyes that it seemed to him as if he was the prime example of sin in the whole world. He didn’t try to soften it any, calling sin by some more palatable words such as weaknesses or shortcomings or mistakes. Where does such conviction come from? That brings us to our final mark of pride and humility.

The fourth mark of pride and humility is that the humble apply the word to their hearts and not just their heads. Notice that the tax collector beat his breast as he prayed for God’s mercy. Why did he do that? Kenneth Bailey has devoted a good part of his life to the study of the culture of the ancient Middle East. He says that the beating of one’s own chest was a dramatic gesture usually reserved for women. A man would do so only in times of extreme emotion. This man was convicted of sin in his heart, and he brought passion to it. He beat his breast because he recognized that the source of his trouble lie deep within his heart. I think one of our great problems is that we use our understanding to keep God’s word from penetrating our hearts. We study the Bible as dispassionately as if we were discussing a math problem needing to be figured out. When we do talk about sin in our lives, we do so as an insight we have gained about ourselves. The modern orthodoxy is quick to acknowledge sin, but never with tears or the beating of the chest. It’s often acknowledged with a smile.

III. The Outcome of Pride and Humility

Jesus said that it was the tax-collector who **“went down to his house justified”** (v. 14). The verb “justified” is a perfect passive participle. The passive voice means that the subject is acted upon by another. In other words, he didn’t justify himself, but had it done to him by another, by God. The perfect tense means that the act has been accomplished so that right now he is in a permanent state of being justified. The sense is that he has been justified as he leaves the temple following his prayer. Not so the Pharisee. Jesus’ concluding words are that God will humble those who exalt themselves through their pride, and he will exalt those who humble themselves through this heartfelt and humble confession. When will that humbling take place? Ultimately, it takes place at the great judgment, when many of the proud will be humbled.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus makes it clear that everything is at stake in the matter of which of these praying men we are like. If the humility of the tax collector looks like someone who has a heartfelt conviction of sin, how do we get such conviction? How did the tax collector get it? Remember that he’s in the temple, and the central thing that happened in the temple was the offering of sacrifices. People would pray as they witnessed the blood of the animals given in atonement for their own sins. We have an indication that the tax collector is thinking of those sacrifices in the word he uses in his prayer that is translated “mercy.” It is a word in Greek that was used to translate the Hebrew word for cover or atonement. He is saying, “Let me be atoned.” He would have witnessed the sacrifice of that innocent animal. First, the priest lays his hands on the animal and confesses the sin of the people. Then with knife in hand, he would have approached the animal, who could not have known of his intent and would have allowed the priest to approach. With a quick and practiced hand, the priest would have made a deep and long cut across the throat of the animal. The eyes would have turned from calm to panicked as the animal realizes what has happened. The blood gushes forth in pulsating fashion with the aid of the still-pumping heart. With every beat of the heart, more blood is lost until the animal sinks first to its knees and then all the way onto its side as its life slips away. It hits the tax collector at that moment, deep in his heart, that it is his sins that deserve this violence, but another has taken it in his place. Jesus is that innocent Lamb, dying in our place.

Though the words were written centuries later, the tax collector’s prayer is well summarized in the well-known hymn by Augustus Toplady. “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress, helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.” As we look to the Lord alone for mercy, let’s ask him now in prayer to give us the tax-collector’s humility. Everything depends on it.