

# ***The Tax Collector and the Pharisee***

**Luke 18:9-14**

**9.25.2016**

**BIG Idea: God excludes the proud but embraces the humble.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

- Today is our second week in our series through the parables of Jesus. It is such a joy to be doing this series with Redeemer Church in Somerville and Renewal Church in Southend. Now, if you remember last week or if you are new, parables can be defined (as one commentator did): ***"an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade."***
- Last week we looked at the parable of the Prodigal Son or what would better be called the Parable of the Father's Extravagant Grace. This week's parable is such a good supplemental passage to last's week's. This week we are exploring the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and what we see is God flipping our expectations on their head. The one who seems most confident and most close to God turns out to be the furthest and the who seems most pathetic is the closest to God.
- ILL – About a year ago I came across one of the most popular TED talks ever done. It is by Social psychologist, Amy Cuddy, and is called, "Your body language shapes who you are." In the talk she highlights how our body language affects how others see us, but it may also change how we see ourselves. Cuddy shows how "power posing" — standing in a posture of confidence, even when we don't feel confident — can affect testosterone and cortisol levels in the brain, and might even have an impact on our chances for success.
- Turns out we like powerful people. We like the person who exudes confidence in the way they walk, stand, and address others.
- In the parable for today the two characters exert completely opposite body language. The Pharisee stands and exudes a confidence. He seems strong and capable. On the other hand the tax collector guy seems pathetic and needy. Just looking at these two characters most of us don't WANT to be like the tax collector because it seems humiliating. He's a loser. But Jesus is telling this story to help us to see that is exactly the position we need to be in to experience the presence of God and power of grace.
- the **BIG IDEA in this text is that God excludes the proud but embraces the humble.** Why does this matter for all of us today? Because somewhere at the center of our human heart is the need to be approved. We may seek it in approval from our parents, or approval of our friends or even at work or at school but we NEED this sense of absolute acceptance and approval. To not have it leaves us restless and ever seeking to find it. Even if we think we reach it there is always that nagging question of did we really do enough? Is there more to do?
- The issue in seeking approval is the same issue in this parable: righteousness. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector are concerned with righteousness. Do they meet the standard? Are they good enough for God? In the Old Testament and the New Testament, the word *righteousness*, both in Greek and in Hebrew, basically have to do with being approved, accepted, passing scrutiny: What we see is two approaches:
  - 1. The Moral Performance Approach (v.11-12)**
- If you grew up in church, the Pharisees gets a bad rap by a lot of people. Who were the Pharisees? They were religious leaders who followed the OT law and were among the most influential groups of Jews in Jesus time. They were known for their relentless commitment to following

God's Law. They were respected in their culture. Jesus had at least a couple of followers who were Pharisees.

- But this Pharisee's prayer is very God-centric: v.11 "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*" For us listening in on this prayer, there is NOTHING wrong with this prayer. He is saying God I you deserve the thanks for making me who I am. It is because of you oh God that I am not an extortioner who steals from other people. I'm not like those who are promote injustice in the world. I'm not a man who cheats on my wife. Thank you God that I am NOT like them. I am grateful to you for it.
- If you are a Christian, how many of you would say, "If it were not for God intervening in your life through your parents, through your friends, through a particular moment in your life, who knows what kind of sinful life you would be caught up in?" All he is doing is saying, "Thank you God, I owe it to you that I am not a jacked up sinner like all of these people. I am moral and upright."
- He then shifts gear to highlight his good activities. V.12 "*I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*" According to what we have already talked about, Who is he thanking for the ability to do that stuff? GOD! He mentions two of the more serious markers of spirituality. Fasting – if you are newer to church, this is where you deny yourself food and sometimes water for a 24 hour period for the purpose of praying and drawing near to God. Tithing – giving 10% of his pay check to the temple. He said he tithes on ALL he gets so if his mom gave him a \$5 bill in his card on his birthday, you better believe .50c was going in the offering basket on Sunday.
- So the Pharisee was serious about his moral behavior. To show the depth of his moral performance he mentions fasting and tithing. Fasting and Tithing are not super popular topics today for us precisely BECAUSE they are so serious. If I said next week we are starting a 12 week series on fasting and tithing, there would be a lot of extra coffee on Sunday mornings, right?
- So all of this moral performance led to a **sense of superiority** over others. We see it in how Jesus said, "*The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed...*" which is a little ambiguous in the Greek and could be translated that he prayed "about himself." Either way he prayed off and away from others, stood, and prayed to or about himself. He was physically acting out what he prayed when he said, "I am not like them."
- Essence of the moral performance approach is "Because I do \_\_\_ and don't do \_\_\_ I am righteous. And because I am righteous, I am better than those people who aren't righteous like me."
- Lest we miss how this moral performance approach to righteousness applies to us, let's bring this to 2016. The Pharisee = someone our culture would hold up as good. A person who volunteers in their community, is charitable in their giving, socially-conscious, honest with others, faithful to friends and family, works hard at their job and recycles relentlessly. He or she is an all around good person in our culture's eyes. We would say "they are righteous... they have met the mark."
- Because of these things there is a sense of self-righteousness, even if it is not shared publicly. This person says to themselves, "I'm a good person because I recycle. I am better than those people who don't recycle." OR "I volunteer my time to serve the poor. I'm a better person than those greedy corporate types that are exploiting the poor."
- This is the moral performance approach to God. That is what the Pharisee is doing and he is even giving God thanks for it all. He approached God based on his moral performance. But then Jesus shifts gears and talks about the...

## 2. The Mercy-Dependent Approach (vv.13)

- Now, if Pharisees get a bad rap in church today, tax collectors got a much worse rap in Jesus time. In Jesus' day, the term *tax collector* was a terrible term because the Israelites were an occupied people. They had been conquered by Rome. Rome took enormous taxes, but it wasn't really taxes. Basically it was the spoils of war. What Rome did was essentially take all the bulk of the wealth of all of their conquered countries and just transfer it back to Rome. The taxes were enormous, and they were gotten at spear point, at sword point.
- Who would have the dirty job of getting these taxes? The answer is the Romans hired Jewish people, Jewish men, to be tax collectors, and they were loathed. They were hated. They were seen the way we saw the collaborators with the Nazis during the European occupation. Why would they do that? Why would they be willing to be so loathed? Money. Plain and simple. So they were especially hated because they were traitors to their own people for money.
- Jesus says in v.13 - *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*
- The tax collector used the definite article with "sinner" meaning he said to God "I am THE sinner." He was also so distraught over his sins that he beats his chest where his heart is located. In the Middle East, generally speaking, women beat their chests, men do not and only on occasion like at a tragic funeral.
- The question arises if he was SO BAD why did the tax collector go to the temple? Why did he pray? Why did he bother to cry out to God? A tax collector was Jewish and while he was forbidden to practice his faith like everyone else, he did have the money to hire tutors in the Scripture. It is believed that the reason Jesus' disciple Matthew knew so much of the Old Testament even though he was a tax collector is that he may have paid someone to teach him.
- In this case, the Tax collector may have been familiar with King David's Psalm of repentance and it gives us a clue why he approached God for mercy. After David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed, God used a prophet to help David see his sin. It wrecked him on a deep level and he wrote Psalm 51 out of that experience of repentance.
- Psalm 51:1 – *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."*
- The tax collector understood what David said here: mercy and righteousness from God is NEVER according to how steadfast and moral you are but how steadfast and loving God is. In essence the Tax Collector was saying, "I'm counting on your character God, because I have nothing. Have mercy on me according to who YOU are."
- For some of you carrying in that sense of guilt and shame today, the good news for you is that you are in the BEST possible position to receive the mercy of God.
- Psalm 51:16-17 *"For you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it,... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*
- This broken tax collector threw himself wholly on God's mercy. He had nothing else to stand on. He was utterly dependent on God to have mercy on him.
- So what does the Tax Collector look like today? We could look at it different ways but I think the most morally reprehensible job we could think of in our culture is a child pornographer. Now, I know that is graphic but that is kind of the point. Tax collectors were the lowest of the low. They were morally reprehensible. No one thought that they were morally good or even close. The nature of what they did DICTATED that they could not be good moral people.
- They can't boast in their morality because they have none. Their only hope is the mercy dependent approach to God that we see in this parable.

- Jesus doesn't leave us to sort out this parable like he does with some. Sometimes he just tells the parable and lets people figure it out but here he makes it very clear what he is saying. And what he says is upside down.

### 3. The Upside-Down Declaration by Jesus (v.14)

- Jesus turns all of our thinking on its head in v.14.
- v.14 *"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified,"* Now if Jesus ended the parable there we all would rejoice. Yay! The humble lowly tax collector is made right with God. What a great story, Jesus!!!
- But Jesus doesn't end the parable there... *"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."* This means the tax collector is made right with God and is declared righteous before God NOT the Pharisee who thanks God for all his goodness.
- REALIZE this is NOT what anyone there was thinking. Not even what we would think if we had no church background. If Jesus were here today and told us a story of a really nice, good upstanding citizen who our whole culture would agree is a good person and then contrasted that with a child pornographer and told us that the child pornographer ended up receiving the mercy of God and was right with God but the good citizen was not right with God we wouldn't know how to process that would we?
- Jesus sets up this parable to draw out the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector so he could help us to see the truth.
  - Their standard of comparison (other people/only God)
  - Their position in prayer (standing/kneeling with face down, beating his chest)
  - Their view of others (contempt/humility – everyone is better than me)
  - Their approach to God (self-righteous/dependent on mercy)
  - Their standing with God (in sin/justified in God's eyes)
- Jesus is saying, "The Pharisee is sinful but the Tax collector is righteous." OR to put it another way, the one who appears righteous is the sinner and the one who appears the sinner is actually righteous.
- If you didn't grow up involved with church the word "justified" which Jesus used might be new. What does Jesus mean when he said the tax collector is justified? Justified is a judicial term meaning that there is no unrighteousness in the person.
- You see, the Pharisee was seeking to be justified in himself ("I am not a bad person and I do good things") but the tax collector knew that he had no righteousness in himself and his only hope to be justified is if God has mercy.
- And that is exactly what Jesus is telling us: GOD EXCLUDES THE PROUD BUT EMBRACES THE HUMBLE.
- You see, **Humility is a catalyst for God's grace.** It creates a vacuum and God's grace rushes in. As long as your heart is full of your pride, there is not room for God's grace, no room for his presence or power. But the moment we find ourselves empty and desperate for him, we find him.
- Until you see your need you won't need the mercy of God. Until you are desperate for God's grace, you will always be on the brink of self-righteousness.
- You might be sitting here and say, "Ok, Bland is this is about me and God. What does this have to do with my everyday life? Your approach to God matters because if you are self-righteous it can destroy your marriage. You are always right. You can't show your internal brokenness. You will always find faults in your spouse.

If you are self righteous it will lead to a self absorbed life where you are constantly performing and everyone around you is being measured by you. And deep in your heart you have this constant fear that you are not good enough. This stuff matters because self-righteous pride is eating at the fabric of your soul and veiling the glorious peace and joy of resting in God's mercy. And one who has embraced God's mercy finds it easier to humble themselves before others and to give mercy to those around them.

- SO What keeps us from embracing the attitude of the tax collector? Risk of humbling self and seeming NEEDY. What if people don't think I have it together? What if others see the real me? Some fear may be internal. You fear coming fully clean with God because you are fearful that he will reject you. That when all your dirty laundry comes out, God won't like you.
- "God's generosity and mercy reaches out to the lost, and it can be received only by the person concerned acknowledging his need of that mercy, like the prodigal son and the tax-collector. Those (like the elder brother) who object to the generosity of God to sinners and who insist on their own righteousness are not only setting themselves against the purposes of God for others, but are also excluding themselves from his love." (David Wenham, Parables of Jesus)
- I started reading through the bible back in January and one of the things I noticed is the pervasiveness of the idea of our passage today. God excludes the proud but embraces the humble. Over and over and over again from Genesis to Revelation it is one of the most repeated ideas throughout Scripture. One such place is 1 Peter 5
- 1 Peter 5:5-6 - *"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you..."*

#### CONCLUSION

- As we close, the question arises. What does God do with the tax collectors sin? What does he do with our sin if we cry out for his mercy? How can a sinner be justified? It is not by God winking at sin and saying, "don't worry about it."
- We saw last week that sin creates a debt. It is a serious offense like murder or treason and so any judge who just dismisses those charges when the evidence is irrefutable is not a Just judge. And God is infinitely just in all that he does. So what does God do with the penalty for sin.
- He absorbs it on the cross. He takes the full penalty for sin that you and I deserve so that we can be fully justified in God's sight. The cross IS the mercy of God to us.
- What will you do with it today? Will you humble yourself before God?

Pray with people - few moments of reflection with music in background.

PEOPLE IN BACK TO PRAY WITH YOU

COMMUNION

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\*\*\*Unless otherwise notes, all verses are taken from the *English Standard Version*, copyright 2000, Crossway Books;