

From time to time, Jesus would address a small group of people when he was teaching. This parable in Luke 18 was one of those occasions. We read in verse 9, “*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.*”

It would seem that this group had two primary character flaws:

1: They trusted in their own righteousness. They thought that their actions gave them right standing with God. This is self-righteousness, and it is rooted in pride. Notice how Jesus ends the parable in verse 14, “*...For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*”

2: They treated others with contempt. Self-righteous people look down on others; they operate out of a “spiritual caste system” that views less religious people as unworthy of their time. We see this today when people display spiritual elitism, when they claim to have a special knowledge or superior access to God.

Before we judge too quickly, we must remember that we will always have a root of pride in our lives; it is part of our fallen human nature. We are sinners saved by the grace of God (See Isaiah 64:6).

Jesus, speaking to this select group of self-righteous people—and to us— tells the story of two men going to the temple to pray.

The Pharisee

Seeing a Pharisee pray would have been a normal and expected thing to witness. The Pharisees were the best of the best when it came to following the law. They were held in high esteem by the common man. Everyone looked up to the piety of the Pharisees, but this man was the epitome of a self-righteous person.

Tax collector

Seeing a tax collector pray would have been a shock to the hearers. Tax collectors were seen as corrupt and sell-outs to the Roman Empire, making a living by stealing from their fellow Jews. The hearers would have been wondering why a tax collector would even be going near the temple, let alone praying.

Jesus allows us to eavesdrop on the prayers of the two men.

The Pharisee’s Prayer

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” (Luke 18:11)

In reality, this wasn’t a prayer; the Pharisee was putting on a show, praying to himself and to those within earshot. To this man, prayer was a way of being recognized and praised.

He begins his prayer by comparing himself to other people. If we are honest, we are all guilty of comparison; daily we come across people who don’t measure up to our standard of decency or accepted behavior. We can be tempted to judge the addict, the homeless, the corrupt businessman, and many more. We can easily be guilty of our own self-righteous thoughts for which we need to repent.

Comparison can become deadly for our spiritual growth. Our standard for holiness must be Jesus, and him alone. With Jesus as our standard, we will always grow in humility and dependency on his grace and mercy for our daily lives.

This Pharisee, looked down on the tax collector and mocked his prayer, mocked his display of worship. The Pharisee didn't realize that he himself was the one who was far off from God.

The Pharisee continued to speak about his accomplishments and his religious credentials, all the while reinforcing his own self-righteousness.

The Tax Collector's Prayer

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13)

This man's posture, position, and desperation indicated his brokenness and humility. He beat his chest and cried out to God for mercy. His prayer was short and didn't contain any religious jargon, but it was from the heart and raw.

The tax collector was convicted of his sins, and he was repentant, sadly a posture that is lacking in many churches today.

Two Kinds of Prayers

The Pharisee needed to repent, but he was blinded by his religious activity. In contrast, the tax collector received the forgiveness he was asking for (see Luke 18:14).

The fact that the tax collector received mercy would have shocked the hearers of the parable. The Pharisee went home just as bound up in his pride as he was when he came to the temple.

The tax collector recognized that prayer put him in the presence of God's holiness. He became fully aware of his sinful nature and his need for forgiveness (see Isaiah 6:5). But the Pharisee only saw himself and his good accomplishments. He was lost in the temple of his own making.

The Pharisee went home thinking that he had worshiped, but he went home unchanged. The tax collector went home changed because he had truly worshiped.

One Kind of Worship

In God's eyes, there is only one kind of true worship, and it begins with acknowledging His preeminence and admitting our own sinful state. Humility is key to worship.

Worship is the place where we, in a broken and contrite spirit, encounter the profound holiness and majesty of God. It's the place where we are confronted by our deepest longing, the longing for the presence of God, and we treasure Him as the answer to that longing.

From that place of humble dependency, we worship as we remember all that God has done for us on the cross and in our lives, celebrating and giving Him the glory. We cannot worship God if we think we are good enough; worship and self-righteousness cannot coexist.

Is pride in your past spiritual achievements hindering your worship?