

Sinning As Well As We Can?

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[0 : 0 0] Please be seated. And then the Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God I thank you that I am not like these other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even this tax collector. This week's theme is sinning as well as we can and it may seem a bit of a bizarre title yet that's exactly what is happening in this morning's reading. Someone is sinning extremely well, extremely flamboyantly and clearly without shame. The very people who were gathered and listened to Jesus would have been shocked and totally outraged that Jesus would have even suggested that the tax collector was in any way worthy of forgiveness. You see in it's so easy, we can wrap our teaching can't we around a theme of being humble and certainly humility is one of the many factors that this scripture speaks to us about but in this parable there is so much more to discover, so much more in here as we look at this scripture as if Jesus is building up as he teaches his people that are gathered around him for the body blow that he is about to land them right in the centre of their religious piety. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. We know straight away from this who this was directed at and here it comes. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Now straight away the audience has probably already made their judgments. They've already judged the situation because this is a tax collector. What is he doing in the temple? What is this tax collector who we know, who we loathe, actually doing, stood here alongside our Pharisee. This man, this Pharisee, this righteous man along here, this religious pillar of the temple and our community. I don't know whether you're aware of Adrian Plass. He wrote a great book. It's called Bacon Sandwiches and Salvation and when it gets to P in here it says, a pillar of the church, a pillar of the church, a person who is consistent and reliable in their commitment to the well-being of the congregation or a big thick thing that holds everything up and restricts vision. Interesting, isn't it? How people have made their judgment. A person here who is consistent in so many ways and in the picture that Jesus presents in this parable, we are shown these two extremes. Jesus describes someone who by all appearance gathered around one of the most holy and devoted Jews, the Pharisee. Now Pharisees get a lot of negative press in the gospel stories, so we might need to adjust our thinking just slightly about them to understand how they are being seen through the eyes of that early, early people that were gathered around Jesus. Pharisees were extremely devout. They were highly disciplined in their religious practices. A Pharisee was obedient to the law, even going above and beyond what the law required. The law required fasting on one day of the year, the day of atonement. A good Pharisee fasted at least once a week. And even, and the most religious Pharisees fasted on a Monday and a Thursday, in addition to that, for the sins of all Israel, as for their own sin as well. The law required tithing as well, but many made allowances for those who were poor, who were too poor to tithing as well. And so a Pharisee might give 10% of everything that he bought, as well as the 10% that he earned, in case the person who sold him the goods hadn't made their tithe, just to make sure that he was well with God. It's an interesting one here that the Pharisee in our story, within this culture, was indeed a pillar of the community, was a very, very, very holy person.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, they were considered as liars, traitors, and cheats. I would like to say on record, if you work for the HMRC, at the moment, and you are listening to this, or you are a member, we love you. We love you as a church. We love you, especially if you are auditing and assessing our tax, because we have diligently, honestly, and generously filled in correctly every part and paid what we needed to pay. So when we mention tax collectors, we know this parable was a long time ago. Before VAT, before personal tax allowances, income tax inheritance, the list goes on. Anyway, tax collectors in Jesus' time were considered as traitors, liars, and cheats. They were often Jews who had sold out to the Romans. They knew their community. They had actually sold out and agreed to take money, and they were not the most honest and accountable of people. In fact, they creamed off quite a bit for themselves. They would set the tax. The Romans would set the tax, but the tax collectors would add on a little bit extra for what they wanted and gathered in, because they knew the people, and they knew. Maybe you came up and think, you can give a little bit more, stuff like that.

But Jews considered tax collectors' practice to be highly unethical. And if a Pharisee was at the top of your religious grading that we talked about earlier on, well, certainly the Pharisee was at the top, the tax collector was way at the bottom. So we get the picture that Jesus is presenting.

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like that tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I give a tenth of all I get. Can you imagine the crowd nodding? The people that were gathered around Jesus saying, yeah, we know he is so holy, because we've seen the way he lives his life. The Pharisee is portrayed as confident before God about himself and his own righteousness. He's not just a good Jewish believer, in fact, he is much better at being Jewish than other Jews. And the fact, the prayer reflects his religious prowess, especially in displaying his righteousness before others. Look at me, how good I am. His very posture looks righteous as he begins to recite a prayer of thanksgiving. And his prayer sounds a lot like the Psalm of David. And here, he probably even changed, as he prayed this prayer, he probably even changed his voice into one of those church voices that religious people often use.

[8 : 04] Have you noticed, vicars and others, when they want to make sure people know who they are praying to God? O Lord, Lord, you have dealt with me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanliness of my hands. He has rewarded me. For I have kept your ways, O Lord, and have not wickedly departed from you, my God.

For all his rules lay before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt. So the Lord has rewarded me to my righteousness according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight. Amen.

Amen. Psalm 18:20, if you know your psalms. Important point. This Pharisee just doesn't recite a psalm. He prays, I thank you, God, that I am not like other people. You know, as he compares himself to rogues and thieves, and especially to this tax collector, he sees off in the corner, the Pharisee is proud of the sharp contrast between his good works and the evil he perceives not far away.

So let's pause. Let's just pause at this point, because I had to really pause at this point in Scripture. Because in this season of Lent, I had to ask myself a deep, searching question. And it was a deep, searching question.

And the question is, if there, is there a bit of Pharisee in me? What bit of Pharisee is in me when I come to worship?

[10 : 02] You know, maybe you're asking yourself the same question. You know, the question is that as we look at ourselves and the way we worship, the way we behave towards other people, the Pharisee was on home ground. He was in the place where he was in the temple, where he spent a lot of his time exposing his righteousness and comparing his lifestyle to others, comparing his goodness and righteousness against others. This was a comfort zone for him.

He knew the rituals, he knew what he had to perform in order not only to please God, but to please himself in the sight of other people. Look at what's on the outside.

But this Scripture makes me look at what's on the inside. You know, do we compare ourselves to others? Do we make our places of worship accessible, welcoming, open to all, those who are seeking whatever their state, dress, attitude and lifestyle?

Are we tempted to take the moral high ground on occasions? Are there people we wouldn't welcome into our church or judge them if they did? And are there people we wouldn't welcome because we've judged them and maybe the way they worship?

It's a really interesting one where our preference is taken preference over God's will. You know, especially maybe I often find when it comes to music. You know, you hear the comment, Oh, they're happy clappy. Ouch.

[11 : 36] What a judgment. You know, the Pharisee in us and around us, brothers and sisters, is never far away. And be on your guard. Because as the banner says here, above all else, guard your heart for everything you, everything you do flows from it.

Guard your heart. Jesus then turns to the listeners to focus on the tax collector. What is he going to say about this man who they are thinking is hardly worthy even to stand in the presence of this fine, upstanding Pharisee, let alone to be in the temple.

But the tax collector stands at a distance. Something in there that says something about his contrite heart.

He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and say, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. The contrast is stark. He stands at a distance.

He can't even look up. He knows his need of God. He seeks compassion, not recognition. God, have mercy on me. Have you ever prayed that prayer?

[12 : 56] Have you ever been in that place where you've just poured it out to the Lord because you know that your heart is not right with God? I have.

And it's a good prayer to have. Have you ever been in that place where you have thrown yourself literally on the mercy and love of God, knowing that his loving, compassionate arms of love, grace and forgiveness enfold you, that they are there for you?

You know, it wouldn't have gone without notice to those listening to this, that the tax collector who prays the psalm also prays the psalm of David. He knows his stuff.

He knows his need of God. He chooses Psalm 51, a prayer of penitence. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy.

Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. It's really interesting, isn't it, that my sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit and a contrite heart.

[14 : 05] And, O Lord, you will not despise that because there's something about honesty in there. The tax collector beats his breast. He bows his head.

His sin is such a burden to him. He can't even get through the rest of the psalm because all he can get out is, have mercy on me, O God. Isn't that a prayer?

Just have mercy on me, O God. How many people do we meet for that is whom their prayer or their life song. Have mercy on me.

Have mercy on me, O Lord. The tax collector, consider the language of these two prayers that we're faced with today. Four times the Pharisee uses the word I as he prays.

He sees himself as the subject of each sentence. And everything the Pharisee says about himself is true. He has set himself apart from others.

[15 : 06] He has faithfully obeyed the law. He really is righteous by the standards of first century Judaism. So before we condemn the Pharisee for his pride, it might be a good idea to wonder if we have prayed a prayer similar to that in the past.

You know, how often might we have seen someone else down on their luck and said, well, there but for the grace of God go I, without doing anything about it.

Or even worse, they deserve what they get. Ouch! It's too easy to judge the Pharisee as prideful, self-righteous, and a hypocrite.

The problem with limiting our understanding to such an obvious interpretation is that we end up sounding just like the Pharisee. Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people.

We aren't like the hypocrites that we find elsewhere. We are so glad we're not like the people in that church down the road. And when we start sounding like the Pharisee, it might mean we are starting to think like the Pharisee.

[16 : 17] The Pharisee's problems, he thinks he's righteous. He is securely grounded in his own actions and attitude. He is trusted in himself and in his own efforts. We may be telling the truth.

He may be telling the truth about himself, but his prayer misses the truth about God. In contrast, the tax collector's prayer is that God is the subject.

God is the subject of his prayer. God is the doer, the one who shows mercy. The Pharisee made himself feel better by comparing himself to someone else he considers to be less than he was.

The tax collector also makes a comparison here, but it wasn't to another person. The tax collector compares himself to the holiness of God.

And he knew his sin, which opens up a door for God's confession, for God's repentance, for God's love.

[17 : 18] Once sinned well in his pride and judgment of others, the tax collector sought the forgiveness and remission of his sins and found repentance. In the same place the Holy Temple stands, two men.

Both men addressed God directly in their prayers. Both men quoted Psalms. Both men prayed about themselves. But one put himself at the center of his praise while the others sought God's mercy.

And yes, there is humility, and one could do with a large dose of that, yes. But the tax collector isn't so much as humble, he's desperate. He is desperate.

The tax collector, he doesn't take time to divide humanity into sides to sort out what is acceptable and what isn't acceptable. He prays, he recognizes his own need of God in the moment.

He doesn't stake his hopes on anything he has done or deserves, but entirely on the mercy and love of God. This is how I come.

[18 : 31] David Lowe writes, the parable is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it's about a pious Pharisee and a desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God.

God who alone can judge the human heart. God who justifies the ungodly when they ask for nothing more than mercy. I tell you, this man, rather than the other, the tax collector, went home justified before God, it says in our scripture.

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. At the end of the day, the Pharisee went home from the temple the same way he came in.

He was righteous in his own eyes and in the eyes of everyone who saw him. Nothing had changed. But the tax collector experienced something different.

Jesus says when he left the temple, he went home justified. What does that mean? It means shown to be in the right, to be acquitted.

[19 : 47] How did that happen? The tax collector made no sacrifice at the temple, no offering or restitution. The tax collector was made right with God by his prayer for God's mercy.

That was his sacrifice. This is me, Lord. This is how I come. And that is how I am. And the Lord answered his prayer. The prayer didn't change God, but it did change the tax collector.

I think it was C.S. Lewis that said, prayer doesn't change God, but it changes me. If the tax collector had kept praying from Psalm 51, he'd have got to verse 8, create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence. Take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

What a wonderful verse that is for each of us who come before our gracious God. Don Chester said of this scripture, it changes us into people with humble and grateful hearts.

[21 : 03] It changes us into people who care less about having our good works recognized. It changes us into people who care more about loving God and loving others than the way we love ourselves and our rituals.

It changes us into disciples of Jesus Christ, who eagerly wants to participate in us and through us in his mission to transform this world.

So people, as we prepare to go out into the world this week in the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve the Lord and the community, I'd like to ask ourselves, where is our heart when we came to worship today?

How did we come to worship? Who did we come to meet? What did we expect? Do we expect to walk out the same way in which we came in, trusting in our own righteousness, or to go out changed and transformed people because we have met with Jesus and been filled afresh in that everything that he has to give us because we've been honest and open with him?

Have we come today with sin heavy on our hearts and have cried out to him knowing the freedom, the freedom and the power that he can bring to wipe the slate clean, to make all things new, that flows not from us, but flows from the throne of grace to come and meet with each and every one of us.

[22 : 36] And that is the graciousness of God, to go be transformed and love our neighbours as ourselves, no matter what. Matt Redman wrote a song that I think is so poignant to this parable.

It says, I'm coming back to the heart of worship. It's all about you. It's all about you, Jesus. I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing that I've made it because it's all about you.

It's all about you, Jesus. It was written at the time when they realised that people were flocking to Chorley Wood to hear Matt Redman and he realised that people were coming not to worship the one true living God, but they were coming to worship the worship band and the song.

And Matt Redman wanted to put that right. So they made the courageous decision that they laid down their some worship and then see how many people came to meet with the one true living God.

At the heart of us all lies preference that often has to be sacrificed. When we again make Jesus front and centre, we seek him with all of our heart.

[23 : 56] Open, humble, expectant, penitent, open to sharing his grace and others, opening to him our language, our openness, our hospitality.

Lord, this is how we come. Fill us afresh. It's all about you, Jesus. It's not all about me and it never will be. One left the temple the same way he had come, righteous in his own eyes.

But sometimes righteousness isn't enough. The one who went home justified was the one who had humbled himself, focused his attention on God's grace and was filled afresh having asked for God's mercy and new life and new beginnings.

I'd love to know the change on Monday morning that happened. Well, it wouldn't have been. It would have been the other days, wouldn't it, for the tax collector.

What difference will that make? Wouldn't we love to have seen what difference that made for him the next day? The question is, what difference will it make for us tomorrow if we've changed our heart posture as we come this morning?

[25 : 08] I sensed, as I wrote this, this would be a significant moment in our Lenten journey. So, let's invite Jesus afresh into our lives, seeking to make his character more like his.

Jesus, it's all about you, Jesus. Just hold that moment. Holy Spirit, would you come, would you bless your people, would you renew a right spirit within us, or would you bless us and encourage us, would you empower us and enthuse us, would you excite us afresh, Lord, with all that you can do in us and through us, because it is all about you, Jesus.

Amen.