

# The Humble and the Proud Before God

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Date: 23 October 2022

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[0:00] Good morning. You are stuck with me today. And once again, I get to talk about Pharisees.

! I don't know if it's Father Ife who does this to me, or if God wants to convict me or what's going on, but it seems like every sermon I get to talk about Pharisees.

So, here I am. So we just read this parable about the tax collector and the Pharisee from the Gospel of Luke.

And today, as we take another look at the Pharisees, I want us to get a little bit more into what it means to be a Pharisee and what it means to be the tax collector.

I think when we read this story, sometimes it's easy for us to understand what Jesus is saying. Or so we think. We look at this story and we know that Jesus is going to say something about this Pharisee and what he's doing that isn't just quite right.

[1:17] We assume the Pharisee is the bad guy. But sometimes I don't think we understand the shock value of what Jesus is saying to his first century audience here. You see, the Pharisees were teachers of the law.

They were lay leaders and scholars and experts in the Hebrew Bible. They understood what it meant to be righteous. They understood the differences between clean and unclean.

They understood the law of Moses and they helped other people to understand it. When Jesus told this parable, people were not expecting necessarily what he was about to say.

Some might have, as Jesus had scolded the Pharisees and the scribes often throughout the Gospel of Luke. But chances are the ones who are gathered around were not going to get this parable perhaps the way that we might.

In verse 9, if you take a look, he says that he told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and people who looked down on everybody else.

[2:24] Do you know these people? In your lives today, do you know people who look down on others and they trust in themselves for their own righteousness? Are we sometimes these very people?

As we look in the mirror. It's easy for us to see the Pharisee as the bad guy. He's the one with the black hat. It's easy for us today to see these Pharisees knowing those people who are self-righteous and look down on others.

But I want us to see something here. I want us to see ourselves as we read this parable. This parable is about all of us. Not just some.

How many times do we look to our own righteousness rather than the righteousness of Christ?

Now, we know that we can't save ourselves, but we do at times marvel in just how righteous we are compared to other people.

How easy it is to see how bad everyone else is, even knowing the stuff that we've done in our lives. And we justify how good we are.

[3:36] You see, that's what some of the Pharisees were doing. Not all of them. There were good ones. They weren't all quote-unquote bad guys. But many of them had this reputation, at least with Jesus and his portrayal of the kingdom of God.

This upside-down kingdom that he's going through the countryside preaching about on his way to Jerusalem and ultimately to his death. He begins his parable telling us that two men went up to the temple to pray.

A Pharisee and the tax collector. Now, it was very common to see the Pharisee going to the temple, especially for prayer. But tax collectors, on the other hand, probably were not as welcome as the Pharisees might be in the temple.

At least they were not welcome into the inner courts. Here, Jesus even tells us that this tax collector is standing far off, as he says in verse 13. But the Pharisee was standing and he begins to pray. Now, standing was the preferred posture for prayer for the Jewish people at this time. So this was not unusual to see this Pharisee standing here with his arms wide open praying to God.

[4:48] In fact, this is what he was supposed to do. But the interesting thing is to notice what the Pharisee prays. He says, God, I thank you that I'm not like other people.

How often do we pray just like that? And if we don't pray like that, how often do we think that? Think about this. You're driving through the streets of Syracuse.

We see homeless people on the corners. You look at them. They're trying to get money. How often do we think to ourselves, are they really homeless?

Are they really that bad off that they need money? Or are they just trying to scam me? I bet that's what they're trying to do. I bet they're just trying to get money because they're lazy and they don't want to work.

Have you ever thought that? Don't raise your hand. But think about it. And you said, I'm not like that person and I am glad I am not like that person.

[5:56] I'm a hardworking person. I earn every dime that I get and everybody should earn everything that they get. These lazy people are out here just trying to rob the hardworking people of Syracuse.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those people. The Pharisee goes on. He describes those other people as greedy, unrighteous, adulterers.

And he even points to the man standing far off and he says, just like this tax collector. Now we know that the tax collectors had a bad reputation at the time.

These people were traitors to their country and to their neighbors. They worked for the occupying Roman government. Many of them became wealthy. In Luke 19, later on, we'll read the story about Zacchaeus, but you may remember the story.

We haven't gotten there yet, but he was a tax collector. He was a chief tax collector. And in that story, Jesus stays at his house. And everybody who saw that complained, saying, he's gone in to stay with the sinner.

[7:07] What a horrible person Jesus must have been. He's hanging out with the tax collectors. Now I'm not going to tell you the whole story, but you get the gist. The important point is that this tax collector was not well liked, as were most.

Matthew, one of the twelve in Jesus' inner circle, was a tax collector. Matthew 9 tells us that Jesus passed by this man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth.

And he says, follow me. Matthew gets up and he follows Jesus. He welcomed this sinner into his innermost circle. Shame on him. You see, these tax collectors who worked for the occupying government, they're like subcontractors.

And they would travel the roads and they would tax the travelers who were carrying merchandise and delivering goods. Some of them were responsible for very large territories.

They had their own employees and they became very rich. They earned profits by demanding higher taxes from the people than what they actually had to pay the Roman government. They would be skimming off the top.

[8:13] Oh, you owe Rome a hundred dollars. In reality, they owe Rome ten and they took the other ninety. If my math is right. You see, the government imposed these taxes, but the tax collector, he would take some more.

The people knew how unscrupulous and dishonest and disloyal these tax collectors were. How corrupt.

How they oppressed their neighbors both financially and politically. These people were not only robbing their neighbors, but they were guilty of treason.

They were collaborators with the Roman government. But wasn't this Pharisee justified in talking about how bad that tax collector was and thanking God that he was not a treasonous, greedy, corrupt, and just all around bad guy?

I mean, look at what the Pharisee does. He fasts twice a week. Now, it was only necessary. And the law said you only had to fast one time a year.

[9:26] And that was on the day of atonement. Now, this guy must have been really righteous and very hungry, fasting twice a week. Not only was he keeping the Torah, but he was exceeding what

the law required.

What a great man! Not only that, but he gave a tenth of everything that he got. Now, we don't know what he received here, but he was only required to tithe on what he earned.

But here it says that he tithed on everything that came into his possession. He again exceeded the law. He justified himself before God because of all the good things that he's done.

The Pharisee looks really good. Outward appearances indicate that this man is truly keeping the law and he probably is keeping it to the letter.

He even talks about how he exceeds what the law demands. How great this Pharisee was. But pay attention to the next part. The tax collector.

[10:40] Whom we said was standing far off and out of the way. Because nobody wanted this man around in the temple. Remember, the temple is the center of religion to the Jews.

It's also the center of government for the Jews. And here we've got a treasonous center where the Spirit of God is supposed to be dwelling. And not only the Spirit of God, but all the righteous men who worked in the Jewish government for him.

How dare this man come to pray? And thank God this Pharisee points out this person's iniquity because we don't want that in the house of God, do we?

But Jesus points out this man, the center, the tax collector, standing again as was the custom. But this time, this man wouldn't even raise his eyes to heaven.

We get the picture that this man does not even feel worthy enough to look to the throne of the Almighty God. When you were a kid, or maybe you were at your job, you remember getting into trouble?

[11:47] I do. I still get into trouble at my job sometimes. Your boss is scolding you. You get called onto the carpet. Or your mom and dad, they bring you in.

All you can do is stand there with your eyes down and your head kind of bowed because you feel ashamed about how bad you messed up. Maybe you broke a window playing baseball in the street. Kids used to throw baseballs in the yard and in the street. Sometimes a stray baseball might fly and hit a neighbor's window or their car. And man, people got mad.

Maybe that's why so many kids sit in their rooms nowadays playing video games so they don't get in trouble throwing baseballs through people's windows. But remember when you had to go tell your parents what you did and you just couldn't look them in the eye?

Well, that's this tax collector. He feels ashamed and guilty. And rightly so. I mean, he's praying to not only the King of the universe, the Creator, the Almighty, but to the One who judges all.

[12:57] He came to the court of God already guilty and confessing his sin. This man felt so much shame, according to what Jesus says here, that he was beating his chest as an indication of the great sorrow and guilt that he felt.

And all he could say was, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. This man did not come to the temple of God to justify himself and show how righteous he was.

Notice the only time he uses the word me is to indicate himself as the object of mercy from God. But compare that to what the Pharisee says when he prayed.

He uses I five times to talk about himself. He says, I thank you. I'm not like other people.

I fast, I give and I get. As good as this man might appear to other people, God knows his heart. The Pharisee suffered from something called pride.

[14:06] But the tax collector came humbly, asking for nothing but mercy. Jesus says the tax collector went back down to his house, justified, whereas the Pharisee did not.

His reason? Because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. But the one who humbles himself will be exalted. The Pharisee seemed righteous and everybody knows those tax collectors are such horrible sinners.

The Sunday school teacher seems righteous, but did you see that guy who came in and sat at the back of the church last Sunday and how dirty he was? Did you smell him? I know he was just here to case the place.

He was checking us out because he wants to rob us in the parking lot. Aren't we glad we're not like him? God humbles the proud. 1 Samuel 2 says that God makes the poor and the rich alike and he brings low and he also exalts.

In Isaiah 2, he says that the haughty eyes of humanity will be brought low and the pride of everyone will be humbled and God alone will be exalted. Again, in Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the

Babylonian empire, he says, praise and exalt the honor and the king of heaven for all his works are truth and his ways are justice and that he is able to humble those who walk in pride.

[15:38] In Numbers 12, we see Moses was the most humble person on the face of the earth. In Acts 20, it says, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with the trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

We could go on and on and on and on. In the Proverbs, it talks about the pride of a person will bring humiliation and the lowly of spirit will obtain honor. Humility versus pride is a huge theme in the scriptures.

And Jesus is trying to tell us about it again here. Now, don't get me wrong. Some people might appear to be good folks and they really are good folks. But how do we present ourselves?

Are we good? We know we're good. Are we better than other people? Do we make it a point to make sure that other people know just how great we are in comparing ourselves to them?

You know, those people over there. How often do we try to justify ourselves? And do we seriously think that on the day of judgment, our own justification is going to help us?

[17:00] I think some of us, though maybe not consciously, we think we stand a chance. This Pharisee did. Jesus ate with sinners. With people who knew they were sinners.

Luke tells us that the Pharisees and the scribes were even complaining about Jesus eating with these sinners. Sometimes we come to church on Sunday. Maybe we come to every Bible study. Every Sunday school class. And we think to ourselves, how good we are by doing these things. But what's the reason behind it? Doing is not enough.

Now, doing can be evidence of what's inside our hearts. And if that's the case, then that's wonderful. That's what having the Spirit of Christ in us is all about. Having a changed heart.

Jeremiah 31-33 says that I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. He's talking about the new covenant.

[18:05] He's talking about the covenant that will come with the Messiah, whom we know as Jesus. We do not justify ourselves before God.

We cannot. Even if we kept every single commandment outwardly, we would not be keeping them inwardly. Jesus warned us in the Sermon on the Mount and in other places throughout the Gospels. You have heard it said that it is a sin to commit murder. But I say to you that if you look at someone with anger in your heart, you have committed murder.

You have heard it said in the law that it commands us not to commit adultery. But I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman with lust in her heart has committed adultery already.

You see, the commands of Jesus are even more stringent than the Mosaic covenant. Or at least the Mosaic covenant as it was not understood fully.

[19:09] We cannot justify ourselves. We cannot declare ourselves to be righteous. No matter what we do, we can only do things after becoming justified through Christ.

You see, this Pharisee went up and his worship was grand. His prayer was grand. All the things that he did that were required of him, plus some, he did it with splendor and with amazement.

But his heart, according to this text, was not right with God. And in his words, we can see that. And Jesus brings that point out for us to see.

He compares that to the tax collector who is a traitor and a robber and a sinner who comes to God asking only for mercy because he knows that he's a sinner and his heart is wicked.

He knows that he cannot justify himself but asks, begs for mercy from the judge on high that he might be declared righteous, that he might be justified by him and through his grace.

[20:12] And Jesus says that he was. Jesus says that he went down to his house justified. Folks, the death, burial, and resurrection were necessary for our justification.

It is only through coming to God humbly, confessing our sins through faith and God's grace that we might inherit this kingdom that Jesus is describing.

This upside down kingdom where the exalted are humbled and the humbled are exalted. Micah 6, 8 tells us, oh man, oh mortal, God has told each of you what is good and what it is that the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and kindness and to walk humbly and attentively with your God.

In Micah's time, the people were worshiping just like this Pharisee. They were doing all kinds of crazy things in worship, things that were not required, and they were coming to the temple and doing this, and they were supposed to be justifying themselves in this.

That's the Pharisee. His heart was not right in his worship. He was not worshiping in spirit and in truth.

[21:34] And he could not justify himself. It is only the Spirit of Christ within us that can do that. We do not love mercy and kindness.

We do not do justice without the Spirit of Christ in us. We cannot walk humbly and attentively with God without the Spirit of Christ in us to guide us.

And we don't. I want to end today asking each of you, asking myself, as I did throughout this week reading, are we like the Pharisee?

Or are we like the tax collector? Are we reliant on our own self-righteousness? Or are we relying on God, humbly begging for mercy?

You see, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, either in this life or in the next. But the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Jesus humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross.

[22:38] And the Bible says everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. Jesus bore that curse through humility and obedience to God so that you and I don't have to rely on our own righteousness.

But through faith in Him and His work can we be justified and counted righteous. Let us pray. Father, we thank you.

We love you. We humbly come to you to beg for mercy. We are sinners and we see ourselves oftentimes as the good guy, the one with the white hat.

But we know, Lord, that every time we do, the pride creeps into our hearts. We try to justify our own actions.

But, Lord, let us always come to you begging for mercy as the tax collector. It is only through you that we can be justified. Only through your righteousness can we be righteous.

[23:41] We thank you for that. We thank you for your death on the cross. We thank you for being raised from the dead and ascending into heaven so that you may sit at the right hand of God now, interceding for us sinners.

Lord, have mercy. Amen.