

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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[0 : 00] Father, please help us today to understand your word. Help us please be at work by your spirit to change our wills. And please, Father, help us to be transformed by your work among us.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, when you're taught preaching, you're often told that you should never make apologies.

At the beginning of a sermon. So I'm going to break that rule this morning and make an apology. The apology is this. I learned, I've learned from bitter experience that if you're not prepared to preach on a particular text and you haven't done as much work as you should do, don't get in the pulpit and try and preach it.

So because of the last week of preparing for yesterday, our Vision and Direction Day, I've been fairly pressed. So when I got home last night, I thought, no, I'm not really quite ready for that sermon tomorrow morning.

So it's going to be next week instead. So the sermon that was due for today will be next week. So I dragged out an old faithful that you have not heard yet.

[1 : 16] So that's what I'm doing. I need to warn you about that beforehand. And by the way, if you were not here yesterday and you'd like to find out what we did, there are copies of the document, the draft document I produced and we discussed yesterday, just in the foyer as you go out.

And so you can pick up a copy there. I'd like you to turn in your Bibles to page 853. By the way, I'd like to say there's a Mars bar, but I haven't got any Mars bars spare.

But I'd love to hear if you can make a connection. In the sovereignty of God, there is a connection between our first Bible reading in 1 Samuel and this passage today. I'd love to hear if you've made the connection as I'm waiting outside there to shake hands with you later on.

So think about that. But listen to the sermon, please. So chapter 18 of Luke's Gospel, page 853, and I'm going to read from verses 9 through to 14.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. Two men went up to a temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

[2 : 24] The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, and even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of my income. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven. But he was beating his breast and saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other. For all who exalt themselves will be humiliated, will be humbled.

But all who humble themselves will be exalted. Let's pray. Father, please help us today as we look at your word.

Thank you for this great story. Please help us to understand it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I'd like to begin today's Bible talk by telling you a parable.

[3 : 25] It's told by Christian Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. The parable is a retelling of one of the parables of the Lord, and it goes like this. One day, there was an Aboriginal guy travelling from Tennant Creek to Darwin.

And on the way, he got beaten up, and he was stripped of his gear and his wine flagon. Along came a member of the Aboriginal Northern Land Council, and he took one look at this guy in the middle of the road, and he said, Good grief!

Look at that horrible jerk, that disgrace! Looks as though he's drunk in the middle of the road. That doesn't do our cause any good. And he drove off. Then there was a member of the Pichinjara tribe from right down south of Alice Springs, and he said, Ha!

Well, Piri, he's not from my tribe. And he left him there to go and talk about social justice at a conference in Darwin. Then along came a white guy who was working for Conzinc Rio Tinto as a geologist.

And he took a look and thought, My poor beaten up brother. And he picked him up and took him in his car to Darwin and put him up at the best hotel. And he stayed there with him for the night, and then he went to the manager in the morning and he said, Listen, you know what I'm worth.

[4 : 39] You want my patronage, so don't rip off my brother because he's black. Here's my Amex gold card to pay for his needs and accommodation for the next week or two. And if he needs longer, put it on my bill.

I'll pay you when I come back. Now remember, I could probably not tell that story myself, but it was written by Aboriginal people. It was a story they told, and I think it really captures the essence of that story, doesn't it?

That well-known parable. They understood exactly what Jesus was saying, and they put the punch exactly in the right place. Today we're going to look at a different parable, and I hope that as we do, we'll be as able to hear the parable as these Aboriginal people heard that parable, and that we'll be able to take the punch and place it where it should be put.

So I hope we might be as bold as they are or were. Let's get underway. And the parable we're looking at today, it's a relatively well-known one, isn't it? It's about two people praying at the temple. One's a Pharisee and prays confidently about his relationship with God. The other, a tax collector, who's got very little confidence in his relationship with God, and he just simply throws himself on God's mercy.

[5 : 54] So Jesus concludes the story by saying that the tax collector gets it right, and he goes home justified before God. That's the story in a nutshell. But really to understand it, we need to do some work on it.

Look at the details. So look at the passage with me. It's not long. It won't take us long to get through, but look at it. Now my approach this morning is going to be to try and hear the parable as the original hearers would have heard it.

Now, we're told who the original hearers are. Have a look at them. They're in verse 9 there. They are some unnamed people who have a certain attitude. So with that in mind, let's have a look at the details.

A number of things I want you to notice. Number one, look at verse 11. You see, some of our modern translations translate the verse as though to present the Pharisee being rather pompous. But I think our translations right here, look at what it says. It says, The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus. What the passage is saying is the Pharisee did the normal thing.

[6 : 54] That is, he probably took the normal position of prayer, that is standing, perhaps even with his eyes lifted up and his hands toward heaven. My second point has to do with understanding the Pharisee.

You see, we're used to hearing, aren't we, of the arrogance of the Pharisee's words. And we think, oh, he's full of himself, isn't he? The word of I occurs all the way through the little passage about him.

But, friends, if I can say this, let's be a little more understanding of this guy. You see, we're inclined to mishearing because we're so used to thinking Pharisees, scumbags.

They're the bad guys, aren't they? But not in the world of the New Testament, let me tell you. You see, in the world of the New Testament, they were the godly ones, the righteous ones, the pious ones.

They were the ones who were committed to a strict Jewish way of life based on adherence to God's covenant with his people and God's law. They sought to totally transform Jewish religious life by bringing it back to God.

[7 : 58] They were a bunch of godly reformers seeking religious renewal. In other words, they were the sort of people that might be looked up to for their godliness and their piety.

And so, the people who originally heard this parable from Jesus may not have heard it as we hear it. They would have looked to this guy and thought, there's a good man.

And it may not have jarred with them in the same way it jars with us or whatever. You see, he was probably heard as being genuine, as genuinely thanking God.

The Pharisee says, God, I thank you that you've given me the opportunity to practice piety. You see, when the Pharisee talks about what he's done, he's talking about some very significant deeds of self-sacrifice.

I mean, every Jew was meant to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement, but this Pharisee, well, he fasts twice a week, Monday and Thursday. And in the heat of the Palestinian sun, he gives up all food and drink completely from sunrise to sunset.

[9 : 01] And he does so to fulfil Isaiah 58 so that he can intercede or even, you know, pray for, vicarious, or even offer vicarious atonement for the sins of the people.

What's more, this Pharisee made sure he tithes fully. Let me explain a bit what this means. You see, strictly speaking, if you're a Jew, you are meant to have tithed everything that comes through your hands.

But what this man did was he, he was probably very realistic about what most people were like and that perhaps, you know, the local people that were bringing food to him, they hadn't tithed it.

So just to make sure, he tithed it again in case someone had slipped up along the way. Right? So he tithed again and then these extra voluntary tithes would have involved more considerable economic sacrifice for him.

But this man's not cheesed off at God, is he? He's not worried about the sacrifice. He willingly offers it and is thankful for God for the opportunity. He's grateful to God. He's a man who's clearly concerned, isn't he, to fulfil the law correctly, contribute to the coming of God's kingdom, and everyone who heard this story would have recognised he's a godly man, concerned with the things of God.

[10 : 17] And they may not hear some of the sufferities that we hear because we think Pharisees aren't good guys. Okay? Now, that brings me to the third point about tax collecting. Let me just remind you in case you don't know, or for those of you who do know, but those of you who don't know, let me tell you a bit about tax collecting.

In first century Palestine, you had a lot of state taxes or a number of them and included was a poll tax and a land tax. Now, the way the Romans collected those sort of taxes is through state officials. However, on top of those taxes, there were other, more local taxes. And these other taxes were farmed out for collection to other people.

And these are the people we know as the tax collectors of the New Testament. Now, you got to be a tax collector by tendering for it. That is, you bid for the right and you were against other people who are bidding for the right of collecting these extra taxes.

And it could be, it could cost you a fair bit to get this position. Nevertheless, if you got it, if you won this tendering process, the business of tax collecting could be a very lucrative business.

[11 : 28] You see, it could work well for you because there were, well, all sorts of well-known ways of adding some little bits and pieces and for defrauding the general public of a bit of extra cash.

And the end result was if you're a tax collector, well, they were commonly regarded as being on the same level as robbers and swindlers. You know, perhaps pimps might be another example.

You know, they were regarded in that, with that sort of attitude. They were considered to be Roman collaborators who oppressed the people of God, stopped them fulfilling their religious duties and had their own interests in mind.

Tax collectors possessed no civil rights. They were shunned by everyone respectable. You would not invite a tax collector for dinner, for example, with your friends. It just would not be done. There's no doubt you thought they were scumbags of the worst sort.

And so when Jesus tells us that this tax collector stood at a distance, everyone hearing would have said, and so he should. He shouldn't be with good company. And in fact, God probably regards him as being well out there, so that's where he should stand, way out there, appropriate for him to be there.

[12 : 38] He belongs on the fringes as far as God is concerned. Next thing I want you to notice is this particular tax collector. You see, there's no doubt about his posture and his words. You see, there's not perhaps like the Pharisee, the eyes up to God, the hands raised.

No, no, he's downcast, he's beating his chest, he's mourning, he's in sorrow. The tax collector says, he's really saying, a Pharisee, he's right. I'm the scum of the earth as far as God is concerned, but please God, be merciful to me.

A sinner. He's undoubtedly expressing deep contrition, longing for forgiveness and mercy. He knows who he is and he knows what he needs and he just yearns for it. So, next thing I want you to notice is the verdict of Jesus. Look very carefully at verse 15. Have a look at it. Sorry, verse 14 and look what Jesus says. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

Now, this verdict by Jesus is, please understand, this is extraordinary and shocking and there's some ambiguity in the Greek, but I think our version has got it right.

[13:50] Listen to it. The tax collector went home justified rather than the Pharisee. It's not more than, but it's rather than the Pharisee.

In other words, this self-effacing tax collector who longs for forgiveness, throws himself on the mercy of God is the one justified by God rather than the Pharisee who's done everything that looks right.

You see, it's not the godly man who gets it right. The ungodly one gets it right. You see, the tax collector comes to God acknowledging, I've got nothing in my hands to bring to you, God.

I'm a nobody. I've got no worth to you. I can only stand at a distance if I can stand at all before you. Nothing in my hands I bring simply to your grace and mercy do I cling.

And do you see what Jesus says? He says, see that man? He's got it right. This is the way to approach God.

[14:52] This is the way to win God's favour. This is the approach of the truly godly. They are those who are humble and those are the people God will exalt.

So there's the parable. Now let's see what we can make of it as far as we ourselves are concerned. What does it mean for us? Well the first thing to do is go back to verse 9. Look at what it says.

Jesus says, He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

This parable's got a very distinct purpose. Its purpose is to speak to anyone who is confident of their own righteousness. Now that in mind, let's go on.

Second thing, when we heard the parable read, who did you identify with? Did you identify with the Pharisee? Or did you identify with the tax collector?

Now remember, I want you to be honest like those Aboriginal people at the beginning. Be honest.

Okay. Who did you identify with? See, nearly every modern reader of this parable knows Pharisees are hypocrites.

[16:02] Jesus is going to praise tax collectors. In other words, we know Pharisees, bad guys, tax collectors, good guys. And so as we listen, who do we identify with?

Tax collectors, don't we? So I'm like the tax collector, really. We don't actually say that, but that's really what we're saying underneath, isn't it? We identify with the tax collector.

Let me tell you, that's not the way the parable would have worked originally. Every Jew who heard it would have identified with the Pharisee. They would have wanted to be the people that prayed as he prayed, lived as he lived. And when Jesus finished the parable, they would have been shocked and dismayed.

Jesus would have pulled the rug underneath from out underneath their feet. You see, they were confident in their own righteousness. They looked down on everybody else. Friends, with that in mind, let's look at us.

When we identified with the tax collector, what were we doing? What were we doing? We were doing exactly what the original hearers were doing.

[17:09] We were saying, I've got it right. I'm like the tax collector. I'm on the side of the good guys. I've got it right.

I know the truth. I know what God wants and I do it. I'm like the tax collector. I'm not like that self-righteous scumbag Pharisee. No, I'm the godly tax collector.

And so we congratulate ourselves, don't we? We say, oh, that's me. We express our confidence, our righteousness. We look down our nose at those who can't get it right like Pharisees.

And Jesus tells us the most sobering truth. It's a wicked parable, isn't it? It really sneaks up on you. If you're doing that, if you're congratulating yourself about your righteousness, then you won't go home this morning justified and right with God.

There's only one way to go home today justified and right with God, and that's to recognise that you bring nothing in your hands to God. And you've got nothing to bring to God.

[18 : 14] Nothing in your hand you bring. Simply to his grace and mercy you cling. That in mind, I want to close by retelling a parable for us in modern guise.

There were two men who came to God to pray. One was a Bible-believing, evangelical, gospel-centred Christian man and the other was a high church liberal. And the Bible-believing guy got on his knees and prayed, God, I thank you that you have revealed all truth to me in your word. I thank you that our church teaches this truth faithfully and that we're not like this poor misguided man who doesn't know the truth about Jesus and who continues to be wrapped up in misguided Catholic traditions that are no real substitute for gospel truth.

God, I know on the last day he'll find out the truth that we've been right and that he's been wrong in his understanding of you. The high church liberal sat in his pew with tears in his eyes and he blurted out to God, Oh God, I don't know a real lot about who exactly you are but I need your help. I've stuffed up my life and I know my only hope is in you. Please help me. Please accept me. Please have mercy on me.

[19 : 36] Now, if I understand Jesus correctly, he would tell me that the second man went home justified rather than the first. Jesus is clear.

Everyone who's confident in their own righteousness will be humbled and those who humble themselves and cast themselves on God's mercy will be exalted. Friends, if this parable has caught you out this morning then I want to urge you to take urgent action.

Go back to the foot of the cross. Humble yourself again. Cast yourself upon God. Call upon his mercy and be assured that in Christ he has supplied it.

In Christ you can be forgiven. P God oning