

# The Religious Addict

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Date: 06 November 1991

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[ 0 : 00 ] If I was to be able to take you at this moment to the most famous art gallery in the world and show you the most famous painting in the world, it probably would be comparable to, in terms of fame, but probably less significant than the word portrait which you just had read to you of the Pharisee and the publican.

Because in the whole picture of Luke's Gospel, in this most beautiful of books, this portrait of the Pharisee and the publican is enormously significant.

It's a wonderful, wonderful story. And we're standing, as it were, in front of it and looking at it today and trying to think what it means.

You know, we're not, I suppose it's sort of like going through the art gallery and not pausing to really take it in.

It is, as it says in the first line, a parable. And this particular parable takes about 50 seconds to read and the rest of your life to understand.

[ 1 : 33 ] And that's about what a parable is meant to do. You can pick it up just as you pass, but by God's grace you won't be able to put it down ever.

You know, that it will stick in your mind and heart. And that's this amazing parable that we're confronted with today.

It's unique as a parable to the Gospel of Mark, or the Gospel of Luke. It doesn't appear in Matthew, Mark, or John. And I have entitled it, The Religious Addict.

And it's a very powerful story. A fellow called Gerald May has written a book on addiction.

And he says that, I mean, he makes this as a kind of general thesis, which he doesn't base on statistics, but on 20 years of counseling as he's a medical doctor.

[ 2 : 51 ] He says, after 20 years of counseling, he's come to the conclusion that all human beings have an inborn desire for God.

All human beings have other desires as well. Some of them capable of more immediate fulfillment and more immediate gratification.

But underlying all those desires is the desire for God. And however that finds expression in what you do with it, that may be very varied.

But the underlying human reality is this desire for God. So that when you bring that observed by a medical doctor together with the scripture, which says, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul and with all thy strength.

You're bringing together the deepest longing of man on the one hand in our humanity and the command of God on the other hand.

[ 4 : 14 ] God has commanded us to do what we most desire to do. And that that's right at the heart of human experience. So when I call this man, the Pharisee, a religious addict, again, I'm using Gerald May's description of what an addiction is.

And it is any compulsive habitual behavior that limits the freedom of human desire.

In other words, it's a, it's something we get to do that stands in the way of the ultimate desire we have. Now, whatever that, whatever that addiction may be, it's a, it's very important that you understand that the difficulty with an addiction is that it provides an immediate gratification, which gets in the way of the ultimate gratification, which your life is all about.

And that is your desire for God. And so, uh, an addiction is, uh, there are addictions which are, which we are attracted to and there, uh, and aversion addiction, addictions, things that we are repulsed by.

Uh, coffee, twisting your hair, neatness, sex, or the stock market are all given as examples of addiction.

[ 5 : 53 ] Things that, uh, that we go after. But, uh, the, uh, the more, uh, the addictions which I think are also listed by, by Gerald May, which come closer to what's happening in this story to the Pharisee are, we become addicted to approval, to being good, to being loved, to being right.

We become addicted to status. And because I am in the religion business, uh, I would say that one of the powerful motivators for people in the business that I am in is that they early on develop those kind of addictions.

For approval, for being good, for being loved, for being right. And, uh, so that you go on in this business because you are addicted to these things.

And so, your ministry is undermined and destroyed by these addictions which get in the way of the ultimate desire of your life, which is a desire for God.

And therefore, the ultimate obedience of your life, which is to love him, uh, above everything. So, people have, uh, addictions against people of different beliefs, people of different class.

[ 7 : 36 ] They sometimes have addictions against failure and addictions against success. So, what I've tried to put before you then is a picture of why I'm calling this man a religious addict.

Uh, and there he is. Uh, he's, he's there.

That's the picture of him that you have in, in the scriptures. Uh, the, uh, the man who, uh, who is standing, as you can read about it.

And that word standing, I'm told by the commentaries means that he was posturing. Uh, that, uh, he was, uh, a community of one person.

He was a loner because he said, he prayed thus with himself. Even into the most secret area of his life, there was nobody there but him.

[ 8 : 58 ] So, when he prayed, we're told that he prayed thus with himself. He didn't know, uh, he, when he prayed, he said, I thank God that I am not like other men.

He belonged to a community of one which was based on a lie. Uh, that he was not like other men because he was profoundly like other men or women.

And, uh, our common humanity, uh, though we make all sorts of subtle distinctions between one another, the reality is that we are very, very like one another.

We have been created like one another. And we need to recognize that likeness. So, he was a community of one.

His world was based on a lie. His dignity was derived from posturing, pretending, uh, like the Pharisees in the New Testament generally, who stood on the street corners to pray long prayer.

[ 10 : 08 ] He had, uh, a very complex pattern of behavior, of religious behavior, so that even, and you know how in the matter of religion, we try to make our, our religion as complex as possible.

He did that by fasting twice in the week. When the scriptures called on him to fast once a year, he did it twice a week, Monday and Thursday, if you want to develop the better.

And, uh, he, uh, he also tithed of all that he possessed. Now you were told by the scriptures to, to, to tie this and this and this and this, but he tithed everything, everything that came to him.

One tent he gave away. So that his religious behavior became quite, uh, complex.

And, uh, you know, and I know because I'm in the ministry business is that people, people want complexity in religion. You know, it's not enough to tell somebody to love your neighbor.

[ 11 : 22 ] You got to say who the neighbor is and how you were to love him and how often you are to love him. And you have to give detailed description of how you go about it. Uh, because people like that kind of complexity in their religion.

And he had it in his. He was, uh, uh, he was irresponsible because he looked on the world, uh, as being, uh, uh, a kind of, that, that the people of the world were sort of hopeless and helpless.

And he, and, uh, that he had no responsibility and he looked on them as extortioners, unjust adulterers, or even like this tax collector who happened to be in the temple with him at the same time.

And as though, in a sense, the sins of the world, which were obviously the product largely of his imagination, and allowed him to dismiss these people because he could see that they were unjust adulterers, extortioners, who would have anything to do with the likes of them?

Certainly not me. And so he was irresponsible in terms of his, uh, behavior towards other people.

[ 12 : 45 ] Well, I've made that description on the basis again of Gerald May's description of how you deal with addiction. And he says you deal with it through honesty, dignity, community, responsibility, and simplicity.

And look at the other man in the story. And he turns up, as you will see in verse 13, as the tax collector, who stood afar off.

And this isn't the same word, even, as the word which the, which describes the Pharisee, who stood and prayed thus with himself. This is not posturing like that word implies.

So what he is, the publican, the tax collector, is that he first makes the discovery that he's part of the whole human community, when he says, I'm a sinner.

God be merciful to me, a sinner. He recognized that he's part of the human race. And you know how often, uh, we use religion in order to say we're not part of the human race.

[14:25] But this man says he is. He's part of the human community, when he acknowledges that he himself is a sinner.

The second thing he says about himself is that he has great dignity. Because he humbles himself, eyes down, beating his breast before God.

Now that dignity is, in a sense, the dignity that he knows a right relationship to God, rather than a false relationship to God, which came from posturing.

This was a man who was not posture. He would not lift up so much as his eyes towards God, but smote himself on the breast saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

You know, I'm, I'm in the, in the great tradition of the Anglican church, where we don't hold up our hands, but we do kneel to pray very devoutly.

[15:32] It's a different way of, you know, we do different things. And, uh, there's all sorts of, uh, there's all sorts of possibility for posture. Now, most denominations posture differently.

Uh, and, uh, I won't describe how the others do it, but I, uh, but I, I, it's just, it's just part of the way we live. That we're posturing all the time.

And this man is not posture. He's acknowledging his oneness with the whole of humanity. And his dignity is portrayed because he humbles himself before God.

He, uh, he's responsible in that he recognizes what the Pharisee never recognized.

And that is that he makes God responsible. In a sense, he says, this just can't go on unless God is merciful.

[16:35] I can't pull it off unless God is merciful to me. So that he has that honesty and acknowledging that he's a sinner, a dignity, and that he's humbled before God.

A community that he's a member, that he's, uh, that he, uh, that he's a member of the human race. Responsibility for his fellow man and asking for God's mercy.

And he has simplicity. And that is he went home when this was done. But it says of him that he, uh, that it's an amazing statement that comes in the story here.

And that he went down to his house justified rather than the other. Um, the reason that we need some kind of regular contact with God is that we might be justified.

Now you don't, uh, that, uh, you might be justified by what? Be justified by God's mercy towards you.

[17:54] It's only a seven word prayer that he says, God be merciful to me, a sinner. That's all. But you see, the prayer says that it all is dependent upon God hearing and responding and being merciful.

And the story ends by saying that God has heard, God has responded, and God is merciful. And he goes home justified because of the mercy of God.

Now, I, it's, I, I, I think that that's, uh, that's one of the hardest things about, about the gospel, I think. Because we all work so hard and so long to, uh, to achieve justification by what we do for others, by, uh, success, the accumulation of wealth, the building up of a name, the building up of dignity, all those things.

All those things are in the direction of trying to achieve, before our fellow man, some kind of justification so that we can hold our head up in society.

[19:08] And, uh, this man wasn't concerned to hold his head up. He would not lift up so much as his eyes towards heaven, but said, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

And so he was justified. And so, uh, you see, the difficulty of it all is that it's very, very simple.

There's nothing, uh, there's nothing you have to do, really, except to open your heart to the mercy of God, as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

That's all you have to do. That's all you have to do. This man went down to his house justified. In fact, when I was thinking about this, it occurred to me that, that the really distinctive characteristic of

this is that religion is not to pretend to be what you are not, but to accept what you are. That's where the point of contact is made. And I, I know that in, in the religion business, that a lot of people hear me as saying to them, try and be what you're not, because what you are, I know, and you know, is pretty despicable.

So try at least to pretend to be different. But, you know, the, I think that's, that's addiction to pharisaical religion to try and do that.

[ 20 : 40 ] I mean, every good member of AA knows that you start by saying that I can't cope by saying in somewhat less religious words, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

That's where you got to start. That's where you got to start. Because I can't do it by myself. That's where the simplicity is. But there's something else about it that I want just to share with you. And that is this. That if I tell you that the characteristics of someone who is overcoming their addiction to religion, that the characteristics are honesty, dignity, community, responsibility, and simplicity.

The absolute perversity is that we could take those five things, and create of them a brand new pharisaism.

You know, that's, that's where, where you get into trouble, is that you could do that. And so I am in some danger, even of having inadvertently told you that your life needs to be marked by honesty, dignity, community, responsibility, and simplicity.

[ 21 : 57 ] And that you, in your perversity, we in our perversity could make of that a whole new pharisaism. And that's why this story is so profound, and why it's meant to live with you for the rest of your life.

It's an inescapable reality that we need to live with for the rest of our lives. And so you have to go back to remember that it's Jesus who tells the story.

It's Jesus who comes to demonstrate the mercy of God. It's Jesus that makes us responsible.

It's Jesus that gives us simplicity. It's Jesus that allows us to be honest. It's Jesus that brings us into community. So that it's not in setting up a new pharisaism.

It is in humbling yourself before the God who humbled himself before us in dying on a cross. That's what life is above.

[ 23 : 08 ] And that's what we are, what we're called to. Jesus tells the parable. Jesus tells the parable, and we have to hear it.

And we have to face the fact that our own worst enemy is our addiction to religion.

I so often feel, I confess this to you, that what we're trying to do in the religion business is get people addicted to it rather than to get them through an encounter with Jesus Christ to be able to respond in the way that's spoken of here.

And you see, Jesus has done, in this story alone, he's done incalculable damage to religion.

He really has. He's just torn it to pieces and tramps it on the floor in the dirt. And it's very hard.

[ 24 : 34 ] Because he has made religion almost secular. He has secularized all our human religious instincts.

He doesn't give us a hat to wear, a lifestyle to follow, a gesture to use. All of them, he says, leave them out.

All you need is the simplicity of the radical acceptance of who you are and the radical acceptance of who God is by the reverberating echo in your heart.

God be merciful to me, a sinner. That's what life is about. And that's what we're called to do and to be. Let me pray.

I guess I've got myself in the position where I can't do more than say to you, and I posture when I'm doing it, I suppose even. But just the thing that we need to pray is, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

[ 26 : 13 ] Amen.