

Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Neil Mancor

[0 : 0 0] We have today the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. That's on page 77, if you can keep your Bibles open there. It's a very familiar parable, known to all of us.

It's a parable which Jesus tells us, in which one man gets it right, and one man gets it wrong.

One goes home right before God, and one does not. As I was preparing this sermon, the word that came to me, and it's a word I want you to keep in your minds this morning, is the word perspective.

Perspective. It's your viewpoint, your standpoint, your perception, your lookout, your angle. Perspective. Because that is the word I want to use to define what Jesus is talking about as he tells us this little parable about these two men who go to the temple.

one who goes home justified before God, and the other does not. Because what the one man gets wrong, and the other gets right, is his perspective.

[1 : 1 1] One puts himself at the heart of his perspective, with God and other people orbiting around him. The other puts God at the center, with himself in right relation to God, and so there finds salvation.

It's perspective. Who's at the center? Who is humbling before whom? Let's look quickly at this. I want to look at the spirit of the Pharisee, and then the prayer of the publican.

First of all, the spirit of the Pharisee. Luke sets the scene for us right at the beginning. Jesus, we are told, told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.

So the error in perspective is defined for us. It is the error of thinking that I can make myself righteous before God. That I'm okay before God.

That I, by virtue of what I am, and what I do, am right before God. And the second error which follows from that is then to despise others.

[2 : 2 4] To so value my own rightness and hate those who do not measure up to my standard. All the while forgetting that I have not measured up to God's standard.

Just look at what the Pharisee does and says, he stands up and utters his prayer. God, I thank Thee 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. The thing is, this character is a Pharisee. He is of the religious elite. He is literate.

He knows his scriptures. And yet his prayer shows that he has neither seen nor understood anything of the God revealed in them. And his perspective is all wrong.

He has God in the wrong perspective. He has others in the wrong perspective. He has himself in the wrong perspective. He's got God in the wrong perspective. Everything he says is enlightening.

[3 : 26] His prayer starts out like a thanksgiving psalm, but then it goes awry. For example, Psalm 92, a wonderful thanksgiving psalm from the scriptures. It is good to give thanks to the Lord to declare thy steadfast love.

How great are thy works, O Lord. Now that is a wonderful psalm of thanksgiving which focuses the attention on God upon his love and upon his works.

It's a wonderful prayer. Instead, this Pharisee thanks God for who he is and what he has done. He's focusing the attention of himself and of God for what he has accomplished and what he has done.

He has God in the wrong perspective. The Pharisee himself is the center of his prayer. Not God. And he gets others in the wrong perspective.

He sets himself apart from other sinners, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and that tax collector standing over there. He sees a gulf of distinction between himself and these other sinful people.

[4 : 37] Of course, it is true that they are sinful and we don't want to be like that and he's not like one of them. And yet, in despising others for their sin, he has forgotten what the scriptures say.

That before God, he too has fallen short. For example, in Daniel 9, To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against him.

Neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God. See, it is God who forgives. It is we who are sinful. It is to God that belong mercies.

Not because of what we have done, but because of the nature of who he is. No, this man has others in the wrong perspective. He's forgotten his own sinfulness.

He doesn't see his need for mercy and forgiveness. He is certain that he is right before God. And so, he has others in the wrong perspective, for they are, in his mind, sinful beyond measure.

[5 : 40] Finally, he gets himself in the wrong perspective. Isn't his prayer extraordinary? I thank you that I'm not like the others. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.

I go to church every Sunday. I pray my prayers faithfully. I am a good person and harm no one. Now, he certainly is doing much that is good.

Fasting twice a week is beyond what was called for in the Old Testament. He is faithfully tithing. That is good. He is doing more than most people. But he has himself in the wrong perspective, forgetting that there is no religious or moral activity that any human being can do, which will make them right before God.

For there are but two fundamental modes of religion, one which is human-centered and one which comes from God. In one, I work myself up to righteousness, to holiness, to bliss, to nirvana.

I work my way into heaven by being a good person. And the other is that which comes from God, which is revealed to us in the Old Testament and brought into fulfillment by Jesus Christ.

[6 : 55] It is the salvation which God in his love offers to us as a free gift and which we, unworthy though we are, receive humbly. And if the Scriptures had penetrated this man's heart, he would have known that God never wanted empty religious activity without a heart turned towards him.

Perhaps he has forgotten the Scriptures. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up. Or Psalm 51, Or Joel chapter 2, Rend your heart and not your garments and turn unto the Lord.

See, that is the way of God's religion. That is the way we find rightness with God. Not in what we do, but in our hearts turned before him. Not in what we have built, but in the mercy that he offers us and which as sinners we receive.

And Jesus ends by pronouncing judgment upon him. This man does not go home justified. He does not go home right before God. Why? Because we do not, we cannot pronounce ourselves right before God.

The story of the Bible is a story of human addiction to sin and the consequences of that sin and the disruption of our relationships with God. The story of the Bible is of Almighty God demonstrating his love for the human race, promising salvation, bringing it to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

[8 : 33] That is the perspective we need to bring to our hearts and lives. That of receiving what God has given us. Spirit of the Pharisee says, I am good because of what I have done.

That is far, far from where God is at. But there is also the prayer of the tax collector. And what a different note is struck. What a different perspective he brings.

Jesus tells us, the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

It must have been shocking to put such words in the mouth of a tax collector, of a sinner, the lowest of the low, someone who is beyond redemption, and yet, who finds it.

Everything about this man communicates repentance, his body language. He's bent down. He beats his breast. He won't look up to heaven. That shows profound remorse and sorrow.

[9 : 37] And his prayers say so much. God be merciful to me, a sinner. Do you see the perspective there? He has placed himself in the right relation to God.

God the giver of mercy. He is sinner. God the one who redeems. He needs to receive.

That's the perspective. That's the perspective we all need to have. That, in a nutshell, is the Gospel. That is salvation. Somehow he has understood and seen that it is human beings who sinned and live with the consequences of sin.

He has understood that it is God and God alone who works to bring around salvation. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

It is the most honest of prayers. The most real of prayers. Pray from a heart that has seen that he is sinful.

[10 : 40] Seeing that he is powerless and that he needs forgiveness. Perhaps he'd read something from the Scriptures like Lamentations 3. Let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven and pray.

We have transgressed and rebelled. Or Daniel 9. Lord, hear. Lord, forgive. Or perhaps he'd heard the words of Psalm 51 and realized they were his.

Against thee, thee only have I sinned and done that which is evil in thy sight so that thou art justified in thy sentence. Create in me a clean heart.

O God. See, that is how God has always wanted to be approached in the Old Testament Scriptures and through Jesus. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

That's such a simple and pure prayer and yet for many of us the hardest of words to say. It is hard to acknowledge our powerlessness in the face of sin.

[11 : 47] It is hard to acknowledge that what I am doing or who I am in my innermost being is sinful. But I need help.

And that is what the tax collector has seen. He has seen the truth about himself in the eyes of God and responded as only he could.

Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. I had a rather frightful experience of seeing myself as I truly am at least in the eyes of Amazon.ca.

You know the online booksellers? I buy all my books through Amazon and I notice that after you buy a number of books they come up with recommendations based on what you buy.

So I looked in my recommendations list last week and they recommended the following three books for me. First, Angels and Demons. Second, The Pedant's Guide to Punctuation.

[12 : 45] Third, The 9-11 Commission Report. And I wondered who on earth do they think I am? Is this some kind of reflection of who I am?

It was very painful and caused me an existential crisis. I'm going to have to order some more thrilling books, I think. But you see, it's always painful, isn't it, when you see yourself in some real way?

Because we go through our lives actually not wanting to look within. We go through our lives not wanting criticism or reality to shine in the innermost being. We don't want to see our hearts.

Because it's painful. And yet, the knowledge of who I am before God, one of the hardest things it is to see. But that's the place of salvation.

That is a place of rightness before God. It is right there when faced with the reality of who I am. And I see it in all its horror, the sinfulness, and when I see God's great mercy for me in Jesus.

[13 : 50] That, that is the moment when I cry out to God. And that is the perspective of salvation. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And so Jesus ends by telling us that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. Yes, indeed.

For the difference in their prayers is in the perspective. The Pharisee puts himself in the center of salvation and of God's attention and makes the mistake of thinking that he has become right before God.

He says, I'm a good person. The tax collector has put God in the center and realized that he has a problem only God can fix.

For salvation, rightness before God is always and only a matter of the free gift of God given to the human race. It is about the disposition of our hearts before God, not the quality of our lives, not the depth of our learning.

[14 : 55] As St. Paul writes in Romans, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift.

And he goes on, then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

And that is the salvation provided by God through Jesus Christ. That is the perspective of salvation. You become like the Pharisee when you forget that salvation cannot happen apart from the freely given gift of God.

When you think that in some way you are making yourself right before God. it is when you present yourself as just because of your religiousness, because of the intrinsic nature of who you are or the goodness of your life and expect acceptance.

It's that wonderful comfortable feeling that comes into our lives when we look back and see that we've lived good lives, that we've gone to church, but perhaps have never surrendered yourself and received the free gift of salvation that comes through Jesus Christ.

[16 : 14] I was talking to a friend of mine not too long ago who comes to church very rarely, so I said, well, it was a little conversation opener, what do you think will happen when you die?

I said, I'm told this is not a good evangelistic approach. But anyway, she said, I'm going to go to heaven. So being the polite person I am, I said, well, how do you know you're going to go to heaven?

And she said, I just know. So I said, yeah, but how can you be so sure about that? And she said, because I'm a good person. True, isn't it?

Isn't that true? That's a fine answer as far as it goes, but is that in reality any different than what the Pharisee says? I find that the 21st century Vancouver form of this religion is to say, I'm a good person, I live a good life, I hurt no one, I tolerate people, I ski.

And if there is a God, he will accept me. Now you may be a good person and live a good life, you may be tolerant and you might ski, but is that all that God wants from you, from us?

[17 : 25] Is that the salvation that God revealed to us in the Bible, in the Old Testament, and brought to fruition in Jesus? No, the sacrifices of God are a broken heart, a broken and contrite spirit, oh God, you will not despise, it's the disposition of our heart before God.

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift in Jesus Christ. For the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ, and for this I praise God, is that we are not made worthy to stand in the presence of God on the basis of who we are or what we have done, but on the basis of what Christ has done.

And I am grateful for that, because I don't know about you, but what I see in myself I despise, because I have been unable to curb my addiction to sin, and I have found in the tax collector's prayer the most helpful of words for me, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

For whoever you are, the prayer of the tax collector is for you. Whatever your lifestyle, whatever your strengths and gifts, whatever your weaknesses and problems, you can stop, you can see, you can get yourself into perspective.

God be merciful unto me, a sinner. For those are the words of eternal life. That is the perspective. Amen.

[18 : 58] Amen.