

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Part 2

The Pharisee Prays

Luke 18:9

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

(NIV)

This is a parable. That is, a story with a meaning. It might have been a true story used by Jesus as an example but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that the hearers learned the central truth. That comes out in the last sentence which reads

Luke 18:14

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(NIV)

We see here that two men went up to the temple to pray.

They say there is a shortage of men in the church these days. I used to speak at a church near my home town and on the wall of the vestry was a photo of rows of smartly dressed men probably of in the early 20th century who used to be at that church. In fact, they had what was called a Brotherhood meeting on a Sunday afternoon in those days and the church would be packed with men dressed in their Sunday best coming to hear preaching from the Bible. However it changed many years. When I used to speak there on a Sunday afternoon, there were hardly any men, not even very elderly ones. The meeting became known as the Brotherhood and Sisterhood when I used to go and speak and it was mostly sisters who had retired years before and we very old and frail. How times had changed.

If two men had come into the church to pray when I used to go, they would have been a rare sight indeed and many churches would just love two extra praying men to add to their numbers. In some of the churches I used to speak at, two extra men would have been a significant percentage increase in the congregation. Christian men who go to church and pray for the kingdom of God and for the good of their families are a rare commodity these days. And women who do the same are getting rare too. Anyone who has such a man or such a woman in their life, is blessed indeed.

The two men in the parable were a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. We looked at Pharisees last time and saw that they were legalists who put their own rules, the Torah, virtually on a level with scripture and could not tolerate the way that the Lord Jesus would repeatedly go against their traditions and do things that were not acceptable to them, like healing a sick person on the Sabbath and then telling the person to roll up his bed and walk, forgiving sins, mixing with ordinary people (the tax collectors and sinners), who to the Pharisees were just “Joe public”, altogether born in sin and who didn’t know any better.

Why had the Pharisee come to church? **To pray**. Or at least he was about to give the impression of praying but, in fact all he had come to do was to tell God how good he was, whereas the tax collector had come to tell God how bad he was. And those two men probably represent large sections of people who go to church on any Sunday. Some feel they are really good because of what they do and some feel they are just miserable sinners saved by grace.

The Pharisee Prays

Let’s look at what the Pharisee says in church and let’s not lose sight of the truth that the Lord Jesus is wanting to convey with this parable. Here it is again:-

Luke 18:14

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(NIV)

Now we see that:

11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

(NIV) Luke 18:11-12

He Stood

First of all we see that he stood. What's wrong with that? Nothing. Just as there is nothing wrong with sitting in prayer or kneeling or with hands together and eyes closed. However, for this Pharisee, he needed to stand because he wanted to make sure that he was seen praying. Jesus once said

Matt 6:5

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

It is so easy for praying to be turned into something which is intended to impress those who see and hear us. (NIV)

God I thank you

Beginning a prayer with God I thank you is a good way to start praying and many do that. The Lord Jesus himself began a prayer in such a way at least at the grave of Lazarus.

John 11:41-42

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

(NIV)

However there is a difference. The Lord says "Father, I thank you that you have heard me" whereas the Pharisee says "Lord I thank you that I... am a jolly good fellow" He thought he was greater when compared than other men and in particular he was greater when compared to the tax collector.

There were two individuals trying to decide on the greatest invention. They were not the world's most intelligent people.

One said "It think it's the television. What do you think?"

The other said "I think it's the Thermos ® Flask."

"Why the Thermos ® Flask?" asked the first.

"Well" said the second "When you pour in something hot it stays hot and when you pour in something cold it stays cold."

"Well, what's so clever about that?" said the first.

To which the second replied "But how does it know?"

When the disciples argued who was the greatest among them the Lord Jesus was not pleased and he made it quite clear that the way up in God's sight is down and that it is the humble who will be exalted.

The Pharisee might have thought he was a great person but God thought otherwise.

On the face of it, by thanking God, it looks like the Pharisee might have been giving God some credit here but that's not the case. All he is doing is reciting a list of his good points so that people in church will hear what he says and think what a fine person he is and how pleased God must be with him. Whereas, God hates to hear such stuff uttered with that kind of motive. Of such people God says

Matt 15:8

8 "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
(NIV)

God is interested in what is in the heart. However it is so easy for praying to be turned into something which is intended to impress those who hear the words we use. Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't use words which might be an encouragement to those who hear them but we need to stop well short of using prayers which we hope might impress those who are listening. There is a good deal of difference between a prayer intended to bless and a prayer intended to impress.

Once I was in a church which had a visitor on Sunday and he stood up and prayed a very impressive prayer. One part of it so impacted me that I can still remember it now. It went like

“and Lord, we need to capitulate and submit to the totalitarian covenant of Christ”

I found that pretty impressive. “Hey, now that is praying.” Anyway, it must have been a year or so later when he came again. He stood and prayed and he used those same words again. When he came the next time - I was listening out for them!

I have no idea if the person was intending to impress the hearers. That's between him and God. Perhaps he was using the words out of habit or perhaps he truly meant them. God knows his heart. However, as a principle, God is not interested in pride-based prayers.

Some people often pray in the same way and you know who it is just by the words they use. I remember one man who invariably began his prayers by saying "Lord, I thank you that we are standing here today on redemption ground". He was a lovely Christian guy and I should have been surprised if his words were chosen to impress the church.

You hear some amusing things too. One man the church I was in use to pray to his "Heavenly Father". Again, he was a lovely Christian. A friend of mine was in the meeting one day and he told me that when the man prayed he said "Heavenly Father, curtail the devil Heavenly Father, curtail the devil, cut his tail right off".

Here's something else which has been prayed:-

"And Lord, we pray Lord for those who are sick, Lord, of the church, Lord".

Very genuine Christians praying very genuine prayers from the heart to God whom they love are treasures in the kingdom of God.

Regrettably, the Pharisee was not praying genuine prayers from the heart to a person he loved. He was simply doing it to be seen and heard and we need to take care that we don't fall into his trap. And we are beginning to slide into it if we begin to think to ourselves, "Lord, I thank you that I don't pray like that Pharisee"

Before we criticise the Pharisee too much, let's not forget that he was living a pretty upright life in society. He said:-

“I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

And the Lord doesn't use the parable to contradict what he said.- because he was fasting twice a week and giving tithes and he wasn't sleeping around and stealing.

One day a ruler asked Jesus

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

After discussing what was meant by “Good Teacher” Jesus said

20 You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother.'"

21 "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.

(NIV) Luke 18:18-21

Now Jesus didn't say “Oh no you haven't” “O yes I have” - “Oh no you haven't”. Jesus didn't argue because it was no doubt true. He was a very upright person and both the ruler and the Pharisee present a challenge to us which we will look at next time.