

Stories
Opposites
Luke 18:9-14

August 20, 2023

HDBC

Please open your Bibles to Luke 18:9-14. It's a simple story about two men who prayed. They were opposites in every way. The story is an example of how to pray. Praying with humility is better than praying with pride. You see the contrasts in multiple ways; their posture, their actions, their attitudes and words. Jesus offered another contrast between these two men when he spoke of the results of their prayers. The results were opposite as well. This is the deeper truth that you don't want to miss. This story teaches how to be right with God.

On the surface this appears to be only about how to pray. Jesus makes it clear that the meaning is much deeper. This story is about the **opposite paths people take to get right with God**. Two religious systems. One is a religion focused on me. I can be good enough to be saved. The other is about God, who is the only one who can cause me to be saved. The Pharisee represents one and the tax collector the other. Powerful story. **Two men, two perspectives, tow results.**

1. The Audience (9)

Interesting that Luke directs our attention to this specific audience. This story was intended to challenge & convict a certain group, while teaching all of us. Note how he describes them. These people **trusted in themselves**. They believed they were righteous. They loved looking in the mirror just to see how great they were. They believed they were God's gifts to the world and that they were superior to common sinners.

Not only did they think they were better than others, they viewed others with contempt. The word means **to treat as nothing**. Living Bible says **scorned everyone else**. NIV says **looked down on everyone else**. Luke is describing those who have an elevated view of themselves. Filled with pride and arrogance. This described the **Pharisees** perfectly.

The Pharisees were the great architects of a system of self-righteousness that dominated life in Israel. They taught that you gained a place in Heaven

by keeping the law and demonstrating your goodness. They desperately needed to see the futility of this system. They completely missed that the entire O.T. system was designed to show them just how impossible and hopeless that plan was. They needed an awakening like the one that came to the **16th century monk named Martin Luther.**

He often sat meditating on the perfect righteousness of God. He gave great attention to his religious life, striving to achieve level of righteousness that would make him pleasing to God. **He confessed his sins** multiple times per day. He sought forgiveness for the smallest of sins. He realized, however, that his efforts could never be enough. He understood that God's standard was perfect righteousness, an impossible goal to reach. It was hopeless!

He had been told as a child that God was full of vengeance, that Jesus sat on a rainbow pouring out vengeance and the only hope you'll ever have to be saved is to go to Mary. And when he understood that God required perfect righteousness, it made him angry. **This is what he said.**

The expression '*the righteousness of God*' was like a thunderbolt in his heart. He hated Paul with all my heart. He hated Paul because Paul wrote in Romans about the righteousness of God. *Only...he said...when I read these words 'the just shall live by faith,' only then did I find relief.*

It was the discovery that changed his life and eternity. But it was a discovery the Pharisees never made. And most of the world has still not made it. The Pharisees knew he was talking about them, and they hated him for it. Now, let's consider the men in the story.

2. The Men (10-13)

Two men went up to the temple to pray. It was common practice for religious men to do so. It would correspond with the times of the burnt offerings prescribe in Leviticus. Likely 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. **The men have a lot in common.** Both believe in God. Both believe in prayer. Both go to temple to pray. Both were honest in what they prayed. But they were opposites in the things that mattered the most.

A. The Pharisee

Keep in mind that he was a religious man. He was active in church.

First, notice his posture. The Pharisee stood...nothing wrong with standing. In fact, standing was an acceptable and normal posture for prayer. Other postures, like kneeling, lying down were acceptable. Lifting hands or not, lift eyes or bowing one's head. All were ok when praying. But in his case, it revealed something on the inside.

Second, notice his focus. Interesting statement, He was **praying to himself**. That can have two possible meanings. **One, he was praying silently.** When you say you were talking to yourself, you probably mean you're talking so nobody else can hear you. That is possible.

But when you look at the content of his prayer it becomes apparent that the focus of his praying is himself. **In two verses he refers to himself five times.** This is a **self-centered prayer**. Essentially, he is telling God how great he is, as if God is lucky to have such a great person as himself. I think of **Gaston in Beauty and the Beast**.

Third, notice the content of his prayer. He not only tells God what he is not but also what he is. He is full of himself. He thanks God that he is not like other people, *swindlers, unjust adulterers, or this tax collector.* **SS teacher with kids. Now aren't you glad we're not like that Pharisee?**

His point: I'm not bad like those other people. Let me remind you that the entrance to Heaven is **not based on the curve**. You will always be able to find people who seem to be more sinful than you. That means **NOTHING!**

Then he proceeded to tell God about all the religious stuff that he did; things that were bound to win him points with God. Fasting twice a week. This was not required by the law. He's trying to get extra credit. He tithes of all he has. Trying to buy his way into heaven.

We may think that this is an exaggeration by Jesus. But He was actually spot-on with the regular practice of the Pharisees. In fact, here is an actual prayer taught in rabbinic literature.

I thank Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou has put my part with those who sit in the Academy, and not with those who sit at the corners (the moneychangers and traders). For, I rise early, and they rise early; I rise

early for the words of the Law, and they to vain things. I labor and they labor; I labor and received a reward; they labor and receive no reward. I run and they run: I run to the life of the world to come and they to the pit of destruction. He was about to hug himself to death.

B. The Tax Collector (13)

He is in stark contrast to the Pharisee. The people hearing the story would immediately see a contrast, but not the same contrast that Jesus was making. They understood the Pharisee to be the good guy and the tax collector the bad guy. *Jesus was about to blow their minds.*

Tax collectors were the most hated people in Israel because they were traitors to their own people. They were, in the eyes of the people, the farthest from God. And it wasn't just the profession that bothered people. it's how they carry it out. They were corrupt. They were swindlers. They were the bad guys. And they knew it. This man knew it.

First, notice his location. He is standing *some distance away*. The Pharisee is as close as he can get to the holy place of the temple. He believed he deserved to be there because in his mind he was already right with God. Not this man. He is far away because he knows that he does not deserve to be close. He does not care what others think. He is a traitor, rejected by his people and most importantly a sinner. His location also gives us a sense of his relationship with God.

Second, notice his posture. He was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven. He is overwhelmed with shame, and it shows up in his posture. He knows that he is unworthy to come into the presence of God. He feels the weight of his own sin.

Third, note his behavior. He is beating his breast. This is the picture of a desperate person. It's an expression of humility and extreme sorrow.

Fourth, notice his prayer. *Be merciful to me.* The Greek is very important. He did not ask for the Lord to "show mercy." He asked the Lord to *be merciful*. This was not about a one-time outward show, but about an ongoing gift from God to this sinner. The meaning of the word is important.

A great theological word, **propitiate**. It means to appease, to make a **satisfaction**. This is a word that speaks of a very important theological truth concerning salvation.

1 John 2:2 And *He Himself is the propitiation for our sins*. It is that which satisfies God. Jesus Christ, in His death, satisfied the requirement by God that sin be punished. This is what this man is seeking. He is asking that the requirement for judgment on his sins be satisfied, forgiven, set aside. He understood that this could not come from himself. It had to come from another. one who was truly righteous. Only if his judgment was experienced by another could it be set aside.

3. The Point (14)

Jesus then offered a stunning analysis. This was a shocking end to the story for His initial hearers. **You might think** that these two people weren't that far apart, theologically. They believed in the same God, the same authoritative document, (O.T.), the same religion. There's just one fine difference and it's what divides everybody on the planet. One thought he could please God on his own, the other knew he couldn't. That's what separates everybody.

Salvation only comes to those who know they need a savior.

Salvation is unavailable to the self-righteous.

There is no way for a person to achieve the necessary righteousness on his own. Jeremiah wrote *the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*. Another prophet also said that all our righteousness is as filthy rags. The dilemma then is if we are sinful and God demands righteousness, how can a man be right with God? Only one who is truly righteous can satisfy the requirement of judgment for others. This is what Jesus did.

Notice verse 14. *This man went down to his house justified*. That is the shocking ending. And that is the primary takeaway. The road to salvation is the humble road, trusting in another, rather than self. And there is only one **another**, and his name is Jesus.

Salvation is unavailable to the self-righteous.

Salvation is available to those who humble call out to Jesus.

It's that simple. Don't make it complicated.