

Our Posture toward God and Everybody Else

Luke 18:9-14

Several years ago this parable in Luke 18 captured my imagination. When that happens I don't take that as a coincidence; I take it as a prompting from the Holy Spirit to slow and and pay attention to what Jesus wants to say to me and to us.

This parable doesn't tell us everything we need to know about how to relate to God and to each other. But this parable teaches something so foundational that if we miss it, everything else will be compromised. Nobody wants to spend years and years doing all sorts of respectable Christian things (studying the Bible, teaching classes, serving, giving, fasting, tithing, etc.) but bear very little fruit - either internally (the fruit of the Spirit) and externally (influence in the lives of others). But that will be the case - we will bear very little fruit - if we miss what Jesus is saying in this parable. We want our lives to bring joy to the heart of God. And we want our lives to bear fruit in time and for eternity. So let's settle in and hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in this short parable.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

Sometimes we have to try and figure out why Jesus told a parable (which is a story that teaches a lesson). But here we are told directly that Jesus told this parable to a very specific group of people.

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

First, they didn't trust in God to make them righteous (to give them a right standing before him); they trusted that their own goodness made them right with God. They got it exactly wrong when it came to their posture toward God.

Second, they "treated others with contempt." If you have an attitude of contempt, you despise another person or group of people so much that you view them as worthless. You feel so superior to them that you think they don't deserve the most basic civility. Jesus told this parable to people whose posture toward others was one of contempt. They got it exactly wrong when it came to their posture toward God and toward others.

Here's the parable:

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

All of Jesus' listeners, including the Pharisees in the crowd, would have assumed that the Pharisee would be the hero of the story. Pharisees were like the special forces in the Jewish religious hierarchy; they excelled above everybody else when it came to devotion to God. But in this parable the Pharisee embodies pride which God finds repulsive.

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

The fact that the Pharisee was "standing by himself" reflects his obsession with differentiating himself from others. His posture reflects his heart attitude of being separate and superior to others. This is what pride prompts us to do; we put ourselves in a category all by ourselves and make sure that everybody knows that we are unlike the vast majority of people.

The Pharisee's prayer reveals how he treated others with contempt. He begins by thanking God that he's not like other people. He points out to God that he's different, superior, not like common sinners.

But the rest of Scripture teaches that this Pharisee was **exactly** like other men. Paul wrote that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Perhaps this Pharisee had avoided the sins of the people he mentioned. But Jesus taught that God isn't merely concerned with a short list of sins that are readily observable that almost everybody agrees we should avoid. God is also concerned about sins of the heart that almost nobody sees.

Perhaps the Pharisee had never swindling people out of money, but had he never coveted his neighbor's possessions? Perhaps he had never committed adultery, but had he never coveted his neighbor's wife (see Exodus 20:17)? As a member of the human race, this Pharisee was just like other men.

His final comment in verse 11 is really choice: "I thank you that I'm not like . . . even this tax collector." To first-century Jews, tax collectors were the bottom of the barrel. They were viewed as traitors because they were fellow Jews who were employed by the Roman Empire. They collected taxes for the Romans and then added a "service charge" for their own income. Tax collectors WERE typically unjust; they DID typically extort money from fellow Jews. The Pharisee's evaluation of the tax collector as a sinner was not wrong. But Jesus' point, as we'll see, is that he still should not have "treated him with contempt."

At the heart of contempt is comparison and differentiation. We selectively look at others' sins/faults/weaknesses and we look righteous by comparison. And so we feel fully justified in viewing them as worthless, despicable people. The more fixated we become on their sins the more justified we feel in our contempt. And we become blind to ways that we are just like the people we loathe.

I am about to ask you to do something that you may not want to do. But you're here, so why not give it a try? Identify a person or a group of people that you either view with contempt or that you are tempted to view with contempt. In other words, how are you just like the Pharisee, differentiating yourself from other people whose sins make them despicable to you? It could be:

- * Perhaps someone who has wronged you in some way, either recently or many years ago. The offense might be trivial or so significant that it's harmed you deeply. But bitterness and anger toward that person has grown to the point of contempt.
- * Maybe you're like the Pharisee in the sense that you have a short list of sins that you find especially offensive. Deep down you think that people who commit those sins are almost sub-human.
- * Maybe you view with contempt people with whom you disagree theologically or politically on some issue. You honestly find it hard to believe that people could be that blind and clueless.

I would remind you that the Pharisee was not wrong about the tax collector. And it may be that **you** are not wrong about the people whom you have come to loathe. But the point of the parable is that ***you and I still don't have a right to treat those people with contempt.*** We will talk about why that is the case later.

When it came to his posture toward other people, the Pharisee got it exactly wrong. The same was true about his posture toward God.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

Remember that Jesus told this parable to those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous." The Pharisee mentions two things that he thought made him righteous. First, he fasted twice a week when the current Jewish practice was to fast only one day a week. Second, "I give tithes of **all** that I get." He wasn't looking for loopholes that allowed him to keep as much of his money as possible. He gave tithes from **all** that he got.

Of course there's nothing wrong with fasting and tithing; both practices are taught in Scripture. But Jesus made clear elsewhere (Matthew 23) that the Pharisees' tithing was one more expression of self-centeredness, not an expression of faith in God and love for God. God was wholly unimpressed with their outward expressions of righteousness because their hearts were far from him.

When it came to his posture toward God, the Pharisee got it exactly wrong.

In verse 13 Jesus paints a stark contrast. Notice the posture of the tax collector as he prayed.

13 But 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!'

This is the posture of a man who knew that his only chance with God involved **mercy**. Whereas the Pharisee was banking on God rewarding his good behavior, the tax collector was banking on God **not punishing** his sinful behavior. He was humble enough to own his sin; and he had faith enough to ask God for mercy. And so he prayed a very simple prayer that is full of theological/spiritual insight, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He understood that he was a sinner. And he believed that God is inclined to show mercy.

In a statement that must have been shocking to the crowd, Jesus says in verse 14 that God granted the request of the tax collector and ignored the prayer of the Pharisee. Here is the point of the parable:

14 I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee **didn't** go home right with God because (as we read in verse 9) because he “trusted in himself as righteous and he treated others with contempt.” He exalted himself before God and he exalted himself above others.

By contrast, the tax collector **did** go home right with God (i.e., justified) because he humbled himself and owned his sin. He knew that it would be foolish for him to “trust in himself as righteous.” The Pharisee and the tax collector illustrate that “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5).

The Point of the Parable: True disciples of Jesus are humble toward God and everyone else. A disciple isn't a fuzzy spiritual word for church-goer. A disciple is a learner/student/apprentice of Jesus. We are not true disciples if we are not learning to be humble toward God and toward everyone else. Jesus was humble toward God. And Jesus was gentle and humble in heart in the way he related to people on earth. Let's take a few minutes to think about being humble in these two ways.

Humble toward God. If you are not yet a follower of Christ, today's passage shows you a way forward with God. First, let the Pharisee be a warning to you. It's very natural to compare yourself favorably with others and assume that you are good with God or that you need only a little help now and then. If we only needed a little help now and then, Jesus wouldn't have died on the cross as our substitute. The brutality of the crucifixion reflects the sinfulness of our sin. Be warned by the Pharisee.

Second, imitate the tax collector. Humble yourself before God in a very comprehensive way. This is how you enter into a relationship with God. Beat your breast (either literally or metaphorically); gaze at the holiness of God until you are distraught over your sinfulness. Cry out to God, “God, I am a sinner. I have rebelled against you in thought, word, and deed. And so I'm asking for mercy through Jesus who died for my sin.” The fact that God sent his Son on this mission gives us the assurance that he **wants** to give us mercy through Jesus Christ. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and (like the tax collector) you will be right with God. Your sins will be forgiven and you can begin the adventure of walking with him through this life and throughout eternity.

If you have already trusted in Jesus alone and have become his disciple, the challenge is to remain humble toward God **forever**. I think that will be very natural in the next life. But in this life it's easy to begin walking with God in humility and drift off into pride, thinking that we know better than God how the universe should be governed. But I find that when I go back to Scripture and fix my eyes on Jesus - especially his suffering on

my behalf - God melts my heart and reminds me that I would be foolish not to humble myself before him. When the theologian Carl Henry was asked (toward the end of his life) how he managed to remain humble decade after decade, he replied, "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?"

If we remain humble before God, we're also in a good position to be:

Humble toward everybody else. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable embodies the type of pride that we need to avoid at all costs. Earlier I mentioned that just as he didn't have a right to treat the tax collector with contempt, we don't have a right to treat anybody with contempt. Why do I say that?

I say that because Jesus did not treat us with contempt (when he had every right to do so). Therefore, we do not have a right to treat others with contempt. The New Testament ethic is that *we should treat each other the way God in Christ has treated us*. Romans 5 tells us that while we were his enemies, he died for us. Luke 23 tells us that Jesus prayed for the Roman soldiers who had nailed him to the cross. 1 Peter 2 tells us that when Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return but entrusted himself to God. Since Jesus treated people that way, he taught us to do the same:

- * Instead of contempt and hatred, Jesus said, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. . ." (Matthew 5:44-45)
- * Peter wrote, "Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but give a blessing instead, for to this you were called." (1 Peter 3:9)

I'm convinced that we don't have a right to treat anybody with contempt.

You might be thinking, "That sounds a bit irresponsible to me. Are you saying that we should ignore all the injustice and sin in the world?" The short answer is "no!" I'm saying that we should live as disciples of Jesus who are genuinely humble before everybody else in the world **so that** we can then have influence in the lives of others. Contempt never persuaded anybody to repent/change their life. But humility is so rare that it gets people's attention - both inside the church and outside.

In Matthew 7:1, Jesus said, "Do not judge, that you be not judged." He was talking about not passing judgment and not condemning people. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, we're in no position to do that. But Jesus goes on to say that we CAN be helpful to people trapped in sin if we deal with our own sin first. In Matthew 7:5 Jesus says:

5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

If we humble ourselves before God and deal with our own sin first, then we'll be useful to others. We won't approach them with an air of superiority because we've considered our own sin as more grievous than theirs. Generally speaking, people can tell if you're coming to them in humility or in arrogance. It's a posture that's as obvious as your body language. If you're full of anger and contempt you won't be clear-headed and compassionate. Humility, on the other hand, is compelling.

This is the counter-cultural nature of the kingdom of God. More than any time I can remember, our world is fueled by contempt; it is in the air. It's like a blood sport; people get praised for their skill in showing contempt. But that's not the culture of the kingdom of God.

What if I make it my ambition to never treat anybody with contempt? What if this church were full of people whose ambition was to never treat anybody with contempt? How sweet would our fellowship be if we never returned evil for evil, or insult for insult, but we gave a blessing instead? What type of freedom would we experience if we humbled ourselves before God and allowed him to uproot all the things that fuel contempt - bitterness, anger, unforgiveness, pride?

How about we give this way of living a try, maybe for the next 8 or 10 years, and see what happens? Life is short, everyone is fighting a great battle, and how you live affects everybody around you. Let's be true disciples who are humble before God and everybody else.