Text: Luke 18:9-14
Title: To those who trust in themselves
Truth: If you think highly of yourself, you will be humbled; but if you humble yourself, you will be lifted up.
Date/Location: Sunday March 30, 2014 at FBC

Introduction

Verses 1-8 open with a parable about the need to persist in prayer. The next section deals with two prayers, one lacking in spiritual life and the other full of vitality, each from a man of entirely different character.

The parable is a story with a point, a story that teaches something. It doesn't necessarily have huge symbolic meaning in every detail. Some parables come right out and tell us the point, as this one does at the beginning and end. It opens by describing to whom Jesus directed his words—to self-righteous people who hated others.

What was common between these two Jewish men was that they both went to the temple to pray. After that, their commonalities cease. The first was a Pharisee, a religious conservative who was concerned with strict observance of the Laws of Moses. The second was a tax collector, a despised class of Jews who were turncoats to the Roman occupying power and who often padded their pockets by collecting extra money.

I. The Pharisee Exemplifies a Non-Saving Approach to God

A. **The Pharisee prayed to himself**. He mentioned God but focused on himself. Notice the number of times "I" occurs in verses 11-12. I count five times in his short prayer. We see he was as a self-righteous person.

B. **The Pharisee compared himself to others**. He despised them. He saw himself as far superior to them. But other men are not the standard! Someone might say "I am better/smarter/harder working… than *that* person." But even if true, that is basically meaningless. Make God your standard of comparison. Can you say you are good/smart/holy compared to Him?

C. **The Pharisee extolled his avoidance of certain sins**, such as extortion, injustice, adultery, or being an oppressive traitor like the tax collector. I cannot tell you the conversations I've had with people in which they extol themselves in that they haven't been "really bad." They haven't murdered or robbed a bank, they are fond of saying. But avoiding those things is expected of every citizen. There is no saving merit in doing that! The Pharisee did not catalog the ways in which he did sin.

D. **The Pharisee honored himself for the good things that he did**, such as fasting twice a week and scrupulous tithing. The other tack that people take is that they have done good works, or kept some religious laws, or similar things. But this all reeks of self-effort and self-righteousness. God doesn't accept that kind of manufactured goodness. He only takes as a saving sacrifice the perfect, unblemished kind of life that Jesus lived.

Jews would fast at various times for religious purposes or because of grief. Fasting is almost always associated with prayer. The Day of Atonement became known as "the fast" because the Jews would not take food while they afflicted their souls (Lev. 16:29, 23:27; Num. 29:7). According to some tradition, this Pharisee may have fasted on Mondays and Thursdays in addition.

This fellow was proud of his tithing – giving 10% of everything he had. We are not under the regulatory regime of the law, and so tithing is not mandated. The teaching of giving for the New Testament Christian is proportionate, generous, sacrificial giving that comes without a specific percentage. 10% is a fine starting point. Try to go up a little bit from there! And when you give, you don't congratulate yourself like this Pharisee. You are only giving back to God's specific use that which He gave you in the first place.

E. All of this helped him to feel better about himself. And in fact he may have been right about some of them. But not one of these things advanced his status in the eyes of God, which is what really matters. His problem, as commentator Morris says, was not that he was not far enough along the road of salvation; rather he was on the wrong road altogether (Luke, Tyndale NT Commentaries, p. 281). Truly he trusted in himself, but despised others. He was self-righteous.

F. God did not "hear" this prayer. That does not mean He didn't know about it, but it means that He did not do anything with it. He ignored it.

II. The Tax Collector is the Pattern of a Saving Response to God

A. **The tax collector was under heavy conviction of sin**. This is evidenced by his stance afar off, his non-eye contact with heaven, and his continual beating himself on the chest. He was in agony over his sinful condition and these indications show it "in color." He wouldn't even look up, as was the normal stance in prayer. He looked down knowing that he was unworthy to even look toward God.

A real understanding of one's sinfulness is evidence of a true saving response to God.

B. **The tax collector's prayer was to God**. It was not at all focused upon himself other than his own unworthiness. It was short and to the point.

C. **The tax collector begged God's mercy**. He could not bring himself to say anything else to God because he was not worthy to ask any other favor.

This request for mercy is powerful. It can be translated like this:

God, be merciful to me, the sinner!
God, be propitiated toward me, sinner that I am!

The tax-man is not just "a" sinner – he is "the" sinner, emphasizing just what he is. And this man is requesting God to remove His just wrath against the man because of his sin.

D. Today God will answer that same prayer. It must be offered with the faith of *how* God accomplishes that propitiation through Jesus.

What I mean is this: First of all, God has sent His Son as propitiation for our sins (Romans 3:25, Heb. 2:17, 1 John 2:2, 4:10). Second, the Son accomplished that for which He was sent by dying, thus providing for the removal (expiation) of the cause of God's wrath and thus the ground for God to be angry with the sinner. He arose from the dead to show the Christian faith is not just a bunch of words. Third, He happily awaits the sinner's plea for mercy. God is not stingy, but rather more than willing to apply His mercy to any sinner who truly desires it through faith in Christ.

Note: Jesus' sacrifice has satisfied God in a general way, but that "mercy" has to be applied to you specifically, "to me," before it has any meaningful effect on your own life.

Should one reject Jesus Christ and seek another way of being reconciled to God and propitiated toward God, he will find that doesn't work.

E. The tax collector did not feel very good about himself, and that is a good thing. He was just where he needed to be in order to receive God's blessing. But afterward, he walked away justified. He did not have to continue thinking that he was a wretched sinner—now he was a saved sinner under God's mercy.

F. God did "hear" the tax collector's prayer. In fact, God did some great things for this repentant sinner.

III. God's Response to the Two Prayers

A. To the Sinner's Prayer of Repentant Faith

1. Justify the sinner. To justify means to impute and declare as righteous. That which the sinner lacks in any measure, God will grant as a gift through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Exalt the humble. The person who genuinely recognizes they are a sinner and responds to God like this tax collector will be exalted. To be clear, this exaltation may not be evident in this earthly life of ours, but it will be in the future.

B. God's Response to the Proud Prayer of the Self-Righteous

1. No response at the time of the prayer. No justification for this man. After all, he didn't feel he needed any justifying.

2. Humble the proud. The person who is full of themselves will find their bubble popped and in eternity they will be abased. It may not appear so immediately in this life, but when it really counts, the proud will experience the truth of this passage.

IV. Other Examples

A. The **humble**: the little children of v. 15-17 receive the kingdom of God. The disciples left those things behind in order to follow Jesus, and they will be rewarded accordingly (v. 28-30). Luke 14:10 teaches a similar lesson about humility.

B. The **proud**: the rich young ruler walks away from Christ, v. 19-23, totally unlike the little children or the tax collector and much more like the Pharisee in his self-righteousness ("All these things I have kept from my youth", v. 21). This truth generalizes to all rich people (v. 24-27).

The way to the high road is the low road. But don't *pretend* to be on the low road and deceive yourself that is the way to the high road. Real humility is happy with the low road always and is content to let God lift you up in His time. See James 4:10 and 1 Peter 5:5-6.

Consider the devastating judgment that awaits the self-righteous, and the exalted place of the justified sinner. Which of the two men are you most like?

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