

### **This One Went Home Justified**

(Series: Parables of Jesus: Posing the Scandal of His Gospel)

Would you agree that there is in each of us something of both the Pharisee and the tax-collector? That is, would you agree that there are times when we pray like the Pharisee ... and there are times when we pray like the tax-collector? Sometimes more like the Pharisee ... sometimes more like the tax-collector?

As we continue our series of studies in parables of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Luke, we come to another of Jesus' stories that initially seems to be about prayer. As far as we know, Jesus taught three parables that initially seem to be about prayer. All three are found in Luke: (1) "The Parable of the Friend at Midnight," as it has traditionally been called, in Luke 11:5-8; (2) "The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge" in Luke 18:1-8; (3) and the one we just read, "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (or Tax-Collector)" in Luke 18:9-14.

Each initially seems to be about prayer. "The Parable of the Friend at Midnight," taught in response to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1). "The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge," taught, as Luke says, "to show that at all times disciples ought to pray and not lose heart" (18:1). And "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector," beginning, "Two men went up into the temple to pray ..." (18:10). I say, "initially seem to be about prayer," because it turns out that each of the three parables is actually about something else. Something related to prayer, yes. But something else.

"The Parable of the Friend at Midnight," turns out to be about the character of God. The parable is not about the man who at mid-night asks for bread in order to feed a guest who has just arrived. The parable is about the man who is asked for the bread. The parable is not about we who pray. The parable is about the God to whom we pray. It is about the shamelessness of God, the God who will not let His name be shamed. The God who said that He has made Himself fully available to us, and does not want the rumor to go around town that one of His came asking for help and was turned away. This is why the parable should be called, "The Parable of the Shameless Father."

"The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge," turns out to be about faith. Authentic faith will not let God go. True and saving faith will stay in God's "face," so to speak, because it knows that God is faithful to finally bring about justice. Yes, we pray because we have faith. But the emphasis of the parable is on faith.

And "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector," turns out to be about righteousness; the parables is all about the justification of sinners. It turns out to be about what burdened the apostle Paul: how can an unholy human being be in right relationship with the Holy God?

The key word in the parable is the Greek word *dikaioi* and its related forms. It can be translated righteous or just. In Luke's introduction to the parable he speaks of those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" – *dikaioi*. The Pharisee boasts in not being "unjust," unrighteous – *adikaioi*. Jesus concludes the parable saying the tax-collector went down to his house "justified," righteous-ized – *dedikaiomenos*.

Old Testament scholar Gerhard Von Rad has shown how important the concept of righteousness is in the Biblical Story. He writes:

“There is absolutely no concept in the OT with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of *sadaqa* (righteousness). It is the standard not only for man’s relationship to God, but also for his relationships to his fellows, ... it is even the standard for man’s relationship to the animals and to his natural environment.” [Old Testament Theology, Vol. I, 370].

One is “righteous,” “justified,” who is faithful to one’s relationships. Righteousness is not about keeping rules and regulations, but about keeping faith with relationships. And, says Von Rad, from the very beginning of the story of God’s relationship with humanity, righteousness is a gift, “always a saving gift” (372). God chooses to have a relationship with us based on grace.

So, like the two other parables that initially seem to be about prayer, the one before us today also ends up being about something else. It turns out to be about righteousness, justification – how unholy humans beings can be in right relationship with the Holy God.

Jesus begins: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax-collector” (18:10).

Focus on the phrase “went up into the temple to pray.” Jesus is not talking about two men having their private devotions. He is talking about two men who have entered into a public worship service. The two men are joining many other men and women in one of the worship services held throughout the day in the huge temple in Jerusalem. “Go up to pray” is a way of saying “go up to worship.” The Pharisee and the tax-collector have joined hundreds of other human beings in a public space to participate in a public event.

And, what we need to know is that praying in that public event meant praying out-loud. The first century Jewish practice was to stand and pray out-loud [I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, 679]. If we had been there in the temple that day we would have heard both men’s prayers. They were saying them out-loud: “God, I thank You that I am not like other people ...” “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Two very different prayers, both spoken out-loud.

Now, it is very important that we try to enter into the context Jesus has in mind when He tells the parable. Luke helps us to do so right at the beginning of his Gospel. He begins the story in Jerusalem, in the temple, with a priest named Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, whom Luke says was “righteous in the sight of God” (1:6).

“Now it came about, while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.”

Custom of the priestly office. Enter the temple to burn incense. People praying at the hour of the offering of incense.

Here is the situation Luke is describing and which Jesus has in mind in telling His parable. The temple was made up of a number of sanctuaries, a number of rooms. At the heart of the temple was the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could enter that space, and only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the great Day of Atonement, and only after an elaborate process of ritual cleansing. Just outside the Holy of Holies was The Holy Place. This is where the priests, like Zachariah, offered incense, the symbol of the prayers of the people of Israel. Just outside The Holy Place was the great high altar on which the lamb was placed after being slain for the sins of the people.

The Holy Place, and Holy of Holies, was “the place of meeting,” where God in His mercy and grace choose to encounter His people. The sacrifice of the lamb made that meeting possible [Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*]. There were a number of services in the temple throughout the day. But only two at which the lamb was sacrificed: at dawn and at 3:00 p.m. It is for one of these services that the Pharisee and tax-collector “went up to pray.”

I wish I understood the liturgy of the service better; it is not clear exactly how things proceeded. This much is clear: It all began with preparation to slay the lamb, the blood of which was sprinkled on the high altar. Prayers would then be offered, both by the priests and the people. At one point silver trumpets would be blown. There would be around 120 blasts of the trumpet. As the priests began to move toward The Holy Place, brass cymbals were struck. A choir of priests would then begin singing the prescribed Psalm of the day.

It was then that the officiating priest would disappear into The Holy Place to offer up incense. And it was then that the people, standing outside The Holy Place, would begin to pray ... out-loud. There were both liturgical prayers and so-called free prayers. That is, the people both prayed in unison and on their own.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax-collector.”

While the service is going on, says Jesus, the Pharisee “stood and prayed by himself.” I used to think the way to render Jesus’ words was, “he stood and prayed to himself.” This makes some sense, for once we hear him pray he clearly is not praying to God! But I think it is more accurate to render Jesus’ words. “he stood and prayed by himself.” That is, he deliberately stands off by himself, away from the crowd.

Why? Because he does not want to be contaminated by the crowd! Hence the phrase in his prayer, “I am not like the others.” But he stays close enough for others to hear what he prays. For in turns out his prayer is meant for the ears of the people he holds in contempt.

There were three basic types of prayers the faithful offered in the temple service: Thanksgiving, confession, request. Thanksgiving for God’s blessing, confession of sin, and requests for God’s to work in their lives in some way. Thanksgiving, confession, request. The Pharisee does not pray any of these prayers! He does begin with “God, I thank You ...” But then goes on to speak of his own accomplishments, not what God has done, or is doing, or will do. The key-note of his prayer is “I”. Five times, “I.” His prayer is all about what he is and does, what he is not and has not done. “I am,” “I am not,” “I do,” “I do not.” I, I, I, I, I.

You can see then that the Pharisee is not praying. The Pharisee is congratulating himself on his own righteousness. “I am not a swindler.” Not a bad thing not to be! Who wants to be a swindler? “I am not unjust.” Also not a bad thing not to be! Who wants to be unjust? Or, at least, known for being unjust? “I am not an adulterer. Again, not a bad thing not to be! Who wants to be an adulterer?

Then the line, "I am not like this tax-collector." He is not only focusing on himself and not on God. He focuses on others and not on God. "I am not like that tax-collector" ... who likely is a swindler and is unjust.

He continues. "I fast twice a week; I pay the tithe of all I get." Here the Pharisee is moving into hyper-self-congratulation. The OT law only prescribed one fast a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But this guy takes it further. He fasts every week. Actually, twice every week. That is 104 times a year: 2 x 52. Not a bad thing to do. Regular fasting is a good spiritual discipline, as long as your doctor says you are healthy enough for it. But this guy is trying to prove something. This guy is trying to earn something. This guy is trying to impress God and others with just how righteous he can be.

"I pay the tithe of all I get." A good thing to do! Just think of the ministry that could be done in the world if all of God's people tithed of all we get! I am told that there is close to one trillion un-tithed dollars in the church of Jesus Christ in North America. But this guy is again trying to prove, earn, impress. The Old Testament law only called for tithing certain blessings: like grains, oil, wine. This guy tithes of everything.

So, get the picture? This Pharisee is attending a worship service at which a lamb is sacrificed for the sins of the people, clearing the way for the people to approach the Living and Holy God. And he stands there and declares how good he is. That is, he stands there and declares that he does not need the sacrifice! He does not say that outright. But it is what he is saying. "I am not like other people ..." I am not like other people who need the lamb to be sacrificed.

He is not praying at all. He is congratulating himself before God and others. And he is lecturing the "others." Remember: he is saying all this out-loud. He is attacking other worshippers for not being as good as he is. He is present at the worship service, but he is not worshipping.

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine sent me a blog posting by a pastor-writer named Tim Challies, of Toronto. It is entitled "I'm Better Than You." And it conveys how easy it is to fall into the spirit of the Pharisee. Let me read a portion of the blog:

I'm kind of a jerk. For as long as I've been able to think about myself, my heart, my life, I've known that I'm a sinful person. I've never doubted the reality of my depravity. And if there ever had been any doubt, being married and having children and immersing myself in a local church has provided all the proof I, and they, need.

But lately I've been considering one simple and disturbing aspect of this sin: I'm better than you. At least, this is what I believe in most of life's situations. I'm just plain better than you. Somewhere deep inside I believe it's true and too often I live and act like it's true.

This is the old sin of pride, I suppose, the one we talk about so often but deal with so seldom, the one many people put at the root of all sin. And it's amazing to me how much of my sin comes down to it. I think I'm better than you. Too often I'm just plain convinced of it.

When you choose to go left, my heart judges and condemns you because I am convinced it would have been better to go right. I don't have nearly all the information you have, and probably only half the wisdom, yet in my heart I am convinced you would have made a far better decision if only you would have asked me to guide you.

When you lead your ministry, I have trouble following because I see all the things you are doing wrong, all the ignorant decisions you are making. I don't know much about children's ministry or music ministry or evangelism ministry or whatever else it is you lead, but I still have it all figured out. Come chat and I'll be glad to set you straight.

When you are given a privilege or responsibility, something that puts you in a position of trust or authority, I am certain that the privilege should have gone to me. I suppose you will do okay, but I think we all know I would have done better. After all, I'm better than you.

This thread, this conviction of my own superiority, runs deep in the background of my life. If you're honest with yourself, you may well find that it's in your life as well.

It matters. It matters because while God calls us toward Christlikeness, we prefer to call others toward us-likeness. God calls us to hold all things up to the light of his Word, while we prefer to hold all things up to the light of our own judgments and our own determinations. Ultimately, we all long for conformity to us rather than to Christ.

... This makes us miserable because we are always convinced life would be easier and better if only others were more like us. This lessens our usefulness to God and his kingdom because we spend so much of our time lamenting all the things others are doing wrong rather than joining them in doing things their way. This increases our sin and hinders our holiness.

I'm kind of a jerk, I know it, and still I have the audacity to want you to be like me. It's baffling. It's gross. It's sin. It's pride. (Tim Challies, "I'm Better than You," taken from <http://www.challies.com/articles/im-better-than-you>; January 06, 2014 {accessed February 18, 2014})

Two men are in a worship service where sacrifices are made of sin so that people might relate to the Holy God. And the Pharisee, standing off from the crowd he judges to be unclean, advertises his being better than the others.

And standing within close view and earshot is the tax-collector. He stands "at a distance" says Jesus. Not because he is afraid he will be contaminated. But because he feels he is unworthy to be part of the service. Yet he is desperate for what the service offers. He is a compromised man, and he knows it. He is working for the Roman oppressors. He is ripping off his fellow Jews. He is unclean by religious standards, and he knows it.

Jesus says he "was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast" (18:13). The normal posture to be observed while praying in the temple was to stand, facing the Holy Place, drawing the feet together, eyes looking down, crossing ones hands across the breast [So Edersheim]. This posture was a way of saying "I am your servant, You are my master."

But this time the tax-collector cannot maintain the posture. Instead he beats his breast with his fists – where the heart is located [So Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 348]. Kenneth Bailey says that this was very unusual for a man to do. Only a person in deep anguish would do it. The only other time in the NT where anyone does it is on Good Friday, at the foot of the cross, where, says Luke, the crowds were lamenting and beating their breasts (23:48).

And he cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (18:13). Out-loud. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” During the solemn worship service. When trumpets are being blown and cymbals are being struck. And Psalms are being prayed. And incense is rising upward. And a lamb’s blood is being split. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

It sounds like what others cry out to Jesus: “Lord, have mercy on me.” But it is more.

The verb the text uses means “make an atonement.” *Hilaskomai*, related to the word we translate “propitiate,” meaning to assuage the anger of God. Meaning to do something to satisfy the wrath of God. “God, be propitious to me, a sinner!” He hears the trumpets announce that the lamb has been slaughtered. And cries out – “do it for me!” “O God, let it be for me!” [So Bailey].

And Jesus says, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified” (18:14). Two men went up into the temple to pray. And one went down justified.

Justified. As Billy Graham is fond of putting it, “just if I’d never sinned.” Or as one NT scholar puts it, God declares the sinner “to have fulfilled everything in his presence that he commanded ...” (Simon Gathercole). To be declared justified is to be declared by God to have done all that He has commanded! All because the Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world!

Talk about the scandal of the Gospel! Two men go up to pray. One a man sure of his own righteousness. The other sure he is in need of help – and it is he who goes down justified.

Is this not the foundation of the apostle Paul’s doctrine of justification by grace through faith because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross? Yes. And it is scandalous. Which is why it is so hard for us to really believe it and live it. The tax-collector simply cries out for God to make a sacrifice for him ... and he is acquitted of all his sin? He is in right-standing with the Holy God?

Writer Robert Capon helps me at this point. He writes: “... our love of justification by works is so profound that at the first opportunity we run from the strange light of grace straight back into the familiar darkness of the law” [*The Parables of Grace*, 183]. And then to prove this to us, he invites us to do two exercises.

The first exercise: Bring the tax-collector back to the temple a week later, with nothing changed in him; he has made no changes in his life. Capon describes the tax-collector as “a fat cat who drives a stretch limo, drinks nothing but Chivas Regal, and never shows up at a party without at least two \$500-a-night call girls in tow” (179).

Take him back to the temple one week later. And have him go back there with nothing in his life reformed: walk him in this week as he walked in last – after seven full days of skimming, wenching, and high-priced Scotch. Put him through the same routine: eyes

down, breast smitten, God be merciful, and all that. Now then. I trust you see that on the basis of the parable as told, God will not mend his divine ways any more than the publican did his wicked ones. He will do this week exactly what he did last: God, in short, will send him down to his house justified. The question in this first exercise is, do you like that? And the answer, of course, is that you do not. You gag on the unfairness of it. The rat is getting off free.

For the second exercise, therefore, take him back to the temple with at least some reform under his belt: no wenching this week perhaps, or drinking cheaper Scotch and giving the difference to the Heart Fund. What do you think now? What is it that you want God to do with him? Question him about the extent to which he has mended his ways? For what purpose? If God didn't count the Pharisee's impressive list, why should he bother with this two-bit one? Or do you want God to look on his heart, not his list, and commend him for good intentions at least? Why? The point of the parable was that the publican confessed that he was dead, not that his heart was in the right place. Why are you so bent on destroying the story by sending the publican back for his second visit with the Pharisee's speech in his pocket? (Robert Capon, *The Parables of Grace*, 183-184)

Is this not why the apostle Paul writes what he does in his letter to the Philippians? Philippians 3: We worship...

in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,  
<sup>4</sup>although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

<sup>7</sup>But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, <sup>9</sup>and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, <sup>10</sup>that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; <sup>11</sup>in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:3-11)

Two men went up the steps into the temple to pray. One prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people ..." The other prayed, "God, let the sacrifice be for me, a sinner." They both went down the steps. But only one went home justified.

There is only one way to be right with God. By grace. As a gift. Given to faith. Made possible by the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

What a parable!