

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Pharisee and the Publican – Luke 18

In the *Truth for Today* programme we are currently looking into some of the parables recounted by our Lord Jesus Christ and today our study is that of the Pharisee and the Publican.

We find this in Luke 18:9-14 which I will now read to you. And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Our Lord addressed this parable to a specific type of person: they were

1. Those that trusted in themselves,
2. Those who were righteous and
3. Those who despised others.

The characters in the parable are the Pharisee, one who was a religious and self satisfied man and the other a publican or tax gatherer, one who was habitually classified with sinners, one who extracted taxes from the ordinary people, usually lining his own pockets at the same time, and then paid them to the hated rulers of the Jews, the Roman occupying power. In the estimation of his fellow Jews he was beyond the pale. Both of them go up to the temple to pray and it is very clear that one does not pray whilst the other does.

Let us first consider the Pharisee. Clearly his is not a prayer to God but rather a recital of his own supposed virtues to God. He glories in what he is and what he does; I am not as other men are; I not an extortioner; I am not unjust; I am not an adulterer. How proud he is as he recites all of these grand qualities to the God of heaven. Little does he realise that such qualities describe what he ought to be and even if such a description was true of him it is only a because the restraining grace of God had prevented him from degenerating into the kind of moral behaviour that he sees in others. Little understood or realised is what these sinful natures that we all have are capable of.

I remember when I was a boy at school, and I cannot imagine how the matter came up in the classroom, the teacher posed a question to the class which went something like this "If any of you were able to press a button in front of you which would kill a person in Australia but at the same time you would come into a fortune of £10,000, would you do it?" I don't know that she got an answer to the question but it helped us to realise what we are capable of. The Pharisee gloried in what he thought he was rather than what God is. The words of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 9:23-24 come to mind. "Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom: neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the LORD which exercise loving kindness, judgement, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD."

Restraining grace is no alternative to atoning sacrifice and comparing our condition with others is useless in assessing our standing before God. This man, like us all, had no sense of his debased nature. As we read in Romans 3:9-12, listen to what the apostle Paul writes "Jews and Gentiles are all under sin; as it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; and there is none that doeth good, no, not one." and then follows a list of the most dastardly things of which we all capable.

The Pharisee glories in what he does and as a Jew he would meticulously keep the law and here in his prayer he says that he fasts twice a week. As a matter of fact the law does not enjoin fasting at all but he, presumably under the impression that once per week is enough, does more than is required and fasts twice. He gives tithes of all that he possesses which was in accordance with the law but then again the Scripture tells us "By the deeds of the law, there shall no flesh be justified in His sight." Then he seeks the most prominent place available to him. The temple proper

was surrounded by a vast area known as the court of the Gentile where there would no doubt be a large company of people. He pushes his way through the crowd to get as near as possible to the entrance of the temple itself and standing there he prayed in as loud a voice as possible so that all might hear.

Whilst I'm not suggesting that there are many today who would be exact replicas of the Pharisee I cannot help but feel that there are many souls who seeking to display their piety before men, and perhaps also before God, demonstrate many of the Pharisee's traits. Many today are regularly seen in a place of worship but how many of them will one day be seen in glory. To the one who looks on, whose attention he sought to draw, this man no doubt had much to commend him but one wonders if he was of the generation of those referred to in Proverbs 30:12; "There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet are not washed from their filthiness".

And now let us take a look at the publican as he makes his approach to God. First of all he stands afar off; he does not seek a place near to the holiest of all, the presence of God. It is as though he leaves ample space for one to intervene between himself and God. One is reminded of Job of old who had similar feelings and cried "neither is that there any daysman between us, that he might lay his hand upon us both". Again when the children of Israel were about to cross the Jordan the command of Jehovah was that the Ark of the Covenant should be borne by the priests and lead the procession and that between at the Ark and the people there should be a space of 2,000 cubits.

Then Paul writing to the Christians at Ephesus reminded them of the position they were once in when he said "Ye who were once afar off". Such is the place where our sins have put us, far from God with great gulf fixed This man would not even lift up his eyes and look to the heavens: who was he to gaze upon the abode of God? His first act was to smite his breast putting his hand upon his own heart. He realised something of the truth of what Jeremiah said "The heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked". There is a wonderful illustration of the truth of this in Exodus 4:6-7. Moses is standing before the burning bush in the very presence of God and is receiving from God his commission to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt into the land at of promise. As part of his instruction Moses is told to put his hand into his breast and then withdraw it. This he does and his hand comes out white with leprosy, a condition in Scripture which invariably illustrates sin. He is told to return it to his bosom and take it out again and this time it comes out clean. Such is the heart of men and this the publican understands.

Now let us listen to his prayer, and what a prayer it is, how much it contains. In our English translation it is a prayer of only six words but those six words went up straight to the throne of God, whereas I am sure that the prayer of the Pharisee reached no higher than, as we say, the ceiling. The addressee of the prayer is God; the petitioner is the publican who in the prayer calls himself a sinner. The substance of the prayer is not an appeal for justice for if God had answered such a request it would have meant immediate condemnation. The beginning of the prayer is God and the end of the prayer a sinner; in between is the request "be merciful to me". Its brevity, six words, and yet its fullness; it is like a holy telegram from earth to heaven. In our version the publican describes himself as "a sinner" but it really should be "the sinner". Paul, the apostle had one time described himself as "the chief of sinners" and may well have thought that he was, but even so he knew that there was complete forgiveness for his sins, and full salvation in Christ, and if it applied to such an one as Paul, then it surely applied to the publican.

The expression "be merciful to me a sinner" deserves commenting upon for there is far more in it than would superficially appear. Mercy is an attribute of God and it is shown by Him in not rendering to us that which we deserve. A story is told of a mother who sought an audience with Napoleon to plead for her son, a soldier in Napoleon's army who was guilty of a serious demeanour. When she asked for a pardon the Emperor replied that it was his second offence, and justice demanded his death. 'I do not ask for justice' said the mother 'I plead for mercy'. But said the Emperor 'He does not deserve mercy'. 'Sir' cried the mother 'It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask' 'Well then' said the Emperor 'I will have mercy'. And her son was saved. The grace of God, on the other hand, is God giving to us what we do not deserve. This man pleads with God that he will not receive his just deserts and bearing in mind his previous life they would have been most severe, hence he pleads for mercy. Mercy is more than clemency and can only be dispensed by one who has the authority to show a gracious attitude towards the one who has given the offence.

Perhaps the more accurate rendering of this phrase would be "be propitiated to me", and this word would be connected to the word mercy. Propitiation is not a word that we use very much today in our ordinary speech. My dictionary tells me that it means "appeasement" but in Scripture it has a much deeper meaning than this. God is not merely appeased but He is able to show mercy because the cause for which mercy is sought has been righteously met and God's holiness maintained. Propitiation is "That aspect of the death of Christ which has vindicated the holy and righteous character of God and in virtue of which He is enabled to be propitious, or merciful, to the whole world".

In Romans 3:24 we read, "Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood". The word there should really be translated 'mercy seat'. In the Tabernacle and later in the Temple the mercy seat covered the Ark of the Covenant and this was the throne God. Every year on the Day of Atonement the high priest would enter into The Holiest of All with the blood of the sin offering and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat. In the Ark were the tables

of the Law and God looking down from heaven, before His eyes fell upon Law He looked upon the precious blood of Christ, for that is what the blood of the sin offering represented. It is only thus that God can be merciful to the sinner and this is what the publican seeks. This is what he pleads, not any merit of his own for a he had none.

The results of this man's visit to the Temple, and we might add that perhaps he had taken his sinner offering with him, was that unlike the Pharisee he went down to his house justified. He knew that his prayer was answered, his spirit had been lifted and no doubt he continued to live in the good of what he had experienced. Romans 1:5 says "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

The Lord himself gives us the judgment on these two men, "Everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." Our Lord uses these exact words in the parable, recorded in Luke 14 teaching His hearers that when they were bidden to a feast they should always take the lower places at table. From such they could always be raised to a higher place, whereas if they appropriated to themselves the higher places they might well be asked to move down. It has been suggested that when the table was all set then the lord of the feast would come in and instead of taking his place at the head of the table he would seat himself at the lower end. Thus would the humble be exalted and the exalted abased. The Lord Jesus was a prime example of this God ordained principle. Two lines from a hymn which has the Lord's death as its theme states,

*From the highest height of glory
To the cross of deepest shame.*

Philippians 2:7-8, speaking of the Lord states "He made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in of the likeness of men and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." What abasement! How humbling! But the very next verse says "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father".

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