

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

(Show slide 1 as soon as the sermon starts)

Is everything okay with us? Are we good? Have I done something wrong?

Phrases like those are pretty common in our human experience.

We love relationships. We are built for relationships. We seek to foster relationships. And yet relationship difficulties are never far away, whether that's in our families or at work or in our social circles.

Because of this we've learned as human beings that we need ways to put things right when they are in the wrong. To remove the tension, to fix the issues and to produce healthier connections going forward.

Here's my question for this morning. We do this all the time on the horizontal level. Person to person Mending what is broken. But what about on the vertical level?

Or to put it more simply, **what about our relationship with God?**

Many people in the UK don't spend a huge amount of time pondering their connection with God. And that's because the vast majority assume that everything is good between them and the Almighty.

We see this particularly when someone dies. Visit a typical funeral service and at some point there will usually be a statement that the person is **up there** and is now freely pursuing their particular passion without hindrance.

The working assumption of most people is that we can **do what we like** and **think what we like**, and all the time God is like a gentle grandfather just waiting to give us sweets when we finally knock on his eternal front door.

In **Luke chapter 18**, Jesus tells a story that is designed to help us get clarity on how God wants us to relate to him.

It's a parable that packs a very powerful punch. It will be shocking to many. However, if we embrace this teaching of Jesus, it will have a profoundly joyful impact on our daily lives and for the eternity to come.

To help us get our heads around what Jesus says in this story I want to break it down into **three** parts..

- The original audience (Vs 9)
- The two people (Vs 10-13)
- The shocking outcome (Vs 14)

First, the original audience (Vs 9)

Change to slide 2 Look at verse 9. **Read verse 9.**

The original audience for Jesus' story are characterised by two words.

- Confidence
- Comparison

First, confidence.

Or more precisely, they were confident of their **own** righteousness.

It's not wrong to be confident of your standing before God.

Indeed, the Christian faith is all about giving people confidence in this area.

Doubt is not better than confidence.

No, confidence before God is a good thing if it's based on the right foundation

The problem with the original audience is not that they were certain that their standing with God was in a good place. No, their problem was what it was based on.

We're told that they were confident of their **own righteousness**.

That is, they were convinced that their moral behaviour and goodness made them acceptable to God.

If you had asked them, **are you and God good?** They would have responded, "Of course." If we had asked them, why? They would have responded, "Because we are good."

The **second marker** of the original audience was **comparison**.

Not only were they confident of their own righteousness, we're told they looked down on everyone else.

This second attitude is very common with those who hope in their own moral goodness as the basis of their right standing before God.

It's an unstable position to believe you are good enough for God.

And so to help people in this position often prop up their confidence by comparing themselves to people who are doing worse in the race.

Change to slide 3 I could claim to be a **very fast runner**. What would I need to do in order to sustain my self confidence? Don't go to the Parkrun on a Saturday but instead head to a local retirement home and challenge the residents to a couple of laps round the nearest field!

Self-confidence and comparison usually go together.

Change to slide 4 **Like the two wings of a plane**, the spiritual ego needs both of them to keep itself in the air.

This way of living is massively popular in this country! It's what most of your friends, family and colleagues think most of the time.

Me and God are cool. I'm good. Other people are worse. And that means I'm definitely flying spiritually high.

If that's your view, the good news of Jesus as the Saviour who died on the cross won't make any sense.

Change to slide 5 It's a bit like the arrival of the **fire brigade** when your house isn't on fire. What's the point?

What do those banking on their own goodness need to know?

They need to meet the two people in Jesus' parable.

Second, the two people (Vs 10-13)

Change to slide 6 Look at verse 10. **Read verses 10 to 13.**

At one level, this story isn't very complicated. Two men go to the same religious place in order to engage in the same religious activity. That is, they both go to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in order to pray to God. When they are finished, they both go home.

One of these men is a **Pharisee** and one of them is a **tax collector**.

The passing of time has made it harder for us to appreciate how people would have responded to those characters in the ancient world.

In our day we may not like paying our taxes, however, working for the tax office is an honourable profession. However, back in Jesus day they were hated by the people. You see they were both collaborators and extortionists. They worked with the Roman occupiers to tax their own people and as they did this they took an extra cut for themselves. If we want **an equivalent emotional response** to how the ancient people would have treated tax collectors then perhaps we need to imagine a drug dealer selling drugs outside a school or a pornography businessman who takes advantage of abused and underage children. This is one of the people who went to pray.

The other person was a Pharisee. Some of us are used to **booing them** internally every time they walk on the pages of Scripture. But in the first century world of Jesus those were the people I could trust with my wallet and my wife, and who would turn up for regular worship.

As the Pharisee arrives at the temple he makes a point of standing by himself. The reason for social distancing becomes clear when we listen to his prayer.

Verse 11. **Read verses 11 and 12.**

What do you make of the prayer? It's not exactly God-centric is it? God gets a mention in the first word but then it all seems to be about the moral achievements of the zealous Pharisees.

It's like he has brought all **his spiritual certificates, medals and gold stars** to church in order to show God how good he is and how naff the competition is.

At first glance we may want to cut him some slack as **he seems to thank God** for the person he has become. However, not so fast! If you are tempted to assume he is genuinely thankful to God and isn't full of self-confidence in his spiritual standing.

Genuine believers do thank God for our personal transformation. Everything positive is from him. But here's the truth. **We don't compare ourselves with other people. No, we do a comparison with a previous version of who we used to be.** I should certainly say, "God, I thank you that I am not the person I used to be." But to say "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" is a poisonous statement from the lips of a self-righteous person who is deluded about their own standing before God.

In **verse 13** the camera shifts to the other character in the story.

Let me read this verse again and as I do listen out for **where** he stands, **how** he stands, and **what** he says.

Read verse 13.

He stands at a distance. However, this is not because he feels himself too good to be around others but because he knows he is too bad.

He doesn't even look up to heaven. This is the first time the vertical direction has been mentioned in the parable.

The Pharisee is only interested in comparing himself to other people rather than to the perfect holy standard of God. But not the tax collector. He isn't looking around to see if anyone more pathetic has walked into the temple. No, he knows what ultimately counts is him and God. He knows he has failed the test!

What he says is hugely significant.

Change to slide 7 God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

He knows he is a sinner. He knows he is in spiritual trouble. That's a great starting place. To acknowledge our failings and our need.

Sadly many people never get to that point. If I don't admit I am a sinner then I will never seek a Saviour.

The tax collector certainly knows the one person who can help.

The God he has offended is also the God full of compassion and mercy.

And so he cries out, "God have mercy on me, a sinner".

Friends, this is the second great moment in someone's salvation journey. First, I'm a sinner. Second, I can't fix the problem myself. I need God to forgiveness me of my sins and pour out his mercy. When he does, the person in the wrong will in an instant be in the right with the most important being in the universe.

To receive mercy means to not get what we deserve.

As sinners we deserve punishment. And so for God to grant us mercy is to withhold the judgement we deserve because of our wrongdoing.

How? Only because of the cross. It's the ultimate place where wrath and mercy meet. Where punishment is poured out on Jesus with the result that we can receive mercy.

As we finish, let me show you..

Third, the shocking outcome (Vs 14)

Change to slide 8 Look at verse 14. **Read verse 14.**

Both men went home but only one of them went home justified.

That is, only one man went home in a right relationship with God.

It wasn't the church going member of the rotary club, who is known for his generous charitable activities. No, it was the drug dealer who had just done time in prison.

Why? Not because one was good and the other was bad. No, both were bad. But one of the bad ones cried out for mercy from the God who is good.

Or in the language of **verse 14**, one of them exalted himself as he came from the temple door and he left in a humiliated position. Whereas, the other one humbled himself and left in a high and exalted place.

That's the principle we need to believe and live out as we relate to God.

Self-righteous pride will lock us out of heaven. Humility will guarantee a sinner an eternal place in God's loving presence.

What does all this mean for us?

Change to slide 9 Or the shorter version, so what?

First, this story shows us the way to have true confidence.

We need to avoid false confidence at all costs.

Jesus has paid the ultimate price so we can have true confidence.

When we humble ourselves and ask for mercy we can be sure that we are right with God. This is the way to joy!

It's not arrogance because it's not based on our own works but on the works of Jesus.

Let's make sure we have asked God for mercy.

Put your blinkers on and forget about other people.

See yourself as a sinner and ask God for mercy based on the cross of Christ. You will go home justified rather than just go home!

Let's humble ourselves now before we are humiliated for all eternity.

Second, this story motivates us in our **evangelism**.

We've discovered that:

- Mercy is required by everyone.
- Mercy is available for everyone.

This discovery can lead us to ask the Hitler question. Could he have been saved and be in heaven if he had asked for mercy through an attitude of true repentance? Absolutely! There is no evidence that he did but the answer is obvious if we have understood the outrageous nature of God's generous grace.

Let's park the Hitler question and ask a more personal one.

What about that kind, respectable and nice friend or family member or work colleague? Where will they spend eternity?

Are they currently destined for heaven or hell?

- Mercy is definitely available for everyone.
- However, mercy is required by everyone.

That includes those around us who are outwardly respectable but who have never asked Jesus for mercy.

Let us pray for the boldness and courage to keep on spreading the good news of Jesus.

Let us pray that God, in his beautiful ways, will bring many people who live in this community to hear the truth about Jesus and lead them to a point where they cry out, "God have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Let's pray.