

The parable begins... *Two men went up to the Temple to pray...* and then ends a few verses later by concluding... *and one went down to his home justified.*

In between is a story that most of us are familiar with. One of the men is extremely confident in himself. He is a Pharisee, one who has devoted his life to his faith and to his synagogue. He strides to the front of the church and stands up proudly to pray. His prayer, we know immediately and intuitively, should not be our prayer.

Dear God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector...

The tax collector he refers to is also in the Temple praying, but he stands at the back and doesn't even dare look up. His prayer is quite different.

God, be merciful to me, a sinner...

This is the one, Jesus says, who returned to his home justified.

The moral of the story: don't be proud or arrogant like the Pharisee, but instead humble like the tax collector.

We could finish right here. Or is there more to this story?

Jesus usually told his stories to the crowds who followed him. If we read the beginning of this story carefully, we note that Jesus told this parable

...to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt..

Many commentators believe this means the parable is aimed at the Pharisees. But as with all Jesus' parables, there is a lesson for us too.

The Pharisees were laymen who believed in and practised rigorous observance of the law. In fact, they often sought to go beyond normal expectations.

To begin with we have,

- “The Pharisee standing by himself.”

He is standing in a prominent position when people would normally sit down to pray. He wants people to see him, and remark on him.

Remember Matthew 6:5

...whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others...

Note that the prayers of both men begin with the simple “God.”

But the Pharisee continues immediately in the first person.

- “I thank you that I am not like other people”
- “I fast twice a week.”

The law prescribed only one annual fast (on the Day of Atonement) but this man fasted voluntarily twice a week. The first century Christian church followed a practice of fasting but it is something which mostly we no longer do. Unless it is associated with trying to lose weight! Some Christians still do give up something for Lent although they are also in a minority today.

Having experience of living in a Muslim country for several years, I experienced the Islamic practice of fasting for the month of Ramadan at close hand. Although non-Muslims living in the country are not required to fast during Ramadan, they are required to not eat, drink or smoke in public during the daylight hours.

I remember going to the Qatar Open Tennis tournament held one year when it was Ramadan. The day's play didn't start till 5pm for that reason. As people filed into the stands there was no food or drink to be seen. When the cannon sounded the end of fasting, I looked around and suddenly all the spectators had their food and drink out like magic.

In Doha, cannons are stationed around the harbour and fired at dawn to announce the beginning of fasting for the day and again at sunset to announce the end of the fast. I will not make comment but simply tell you that what I observed was a country which turned night into day and day into night. The shops and restaurants are closed during the day, opening in the late afternoon and staying open until well after midnight. Likewise Government offices including the Post Office. Posting a letter at 11pm in an eerily deserted Post Office is quite a unique experience.

People fast during the daylight hours and most don't go to work, leaving it to non-Muslim expat employees. But then they feast and party all night. I am not sure what all that achieves. Of course, many devout Muslims fast for all the right reasons. I played tennis in 40-50 degree heat with a young woman who refused to drink because it was Ramadan and she was fasting.

The Pharisee goes on, listing his admirable practices.

- "I give a tenth of all my income."

A tithe on everything was more than what was expected. The norm was that some things would be excluded from the tithe.

This man, this Pharisee, is telling God how good he is. He attempts to justify himself by making comparisons with others, such as the tax collector.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were hated in first century Judea. They were regarded as corrupt and despicable men, because they were. They

were hired by the Romans to collect taxes and normal practice was that the tax collectors would add their own cut to the required Roman tax.

By doing so they became very wealthy.

That the tax collector would go to his home justified is a complete reversal of expectations – ours and the listeners.

Justified is not a word we tend to use in everyday language. This verb in Greek has the same root as the adjective for *righteous*. The person who is justified is proclaimed righteous. The New Testament writers, particularly Paul, present “justification by faith in Christ.” Perhaps we could define “justification” as the act of God declaring men free from guilt and acceptable to him.

If we look at this table, it’s quite simple.

PROBLEM	sin
SOLUTION	God’s justifying activity in Christ
RIGHTEOUSNESS	not a quality of God but God’s activity of deliverance or justification, of making right our relationship with God

Jesus wants to teach people the importance of praying with the right attitude. So, this parable is first aimed at those who think they are very righteous and look down on others – that is, the Pharisees. We describe this commonly as self-righteousness. Do we say to ourselves, “Thank goodness I’m not like that Pharisee!” Do we try to define ourselves by defining others? Instead of looking at ourselves, do we focus on what makes us better than others? Are we self-righteous? The answer has to be - “sometimes.”

This has never been truer than in today's world, when this group or that group tries to shore up its own identity and right-ness by shouting everyone else down. We used to call it "standing together against a common enemy." But today it has become something more than that...to the point where common decency seems to have gone right out the window. People are excluded and even sacked because they don't espouse the 'right' values.

The Pharisee says he is not like others.

Bill Loader asks,

What if he really is unlike others?

Nothing suggests that the claim that he has not committed the sins he mentions is untrue, nor the claim that he is not like the tax collector, who would have been expected to have ripped people off to his own advantage. Nor are the fasting days being disparaged, nor the conscientious tithing. The fastidiousness is not condemned in itself.

BUT...the pharisee's religious conscientiousness misses the point.

You can keep all the commandments and do many other things and still miss the point. Remember the rich young ruler?

...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven...

The chief problem in this story is with the Pharisee's pride and disparagement of the tax collector.

Bruce Prewer makes this observation,

Those who attempt to justify themselves leave no room to receive grace. They go home not vindicated, not because God withholds his grace but because they are not ready to receive it. If you are full of yourself, there is not much room for God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is at the other end of the scale compared to the Pharisee. He was a despicable man, but he knew he was. He was aware that any comparison with others would be to his detriment.

He keeps his distance. Partly, this is not feeling worthy of coming closer.

Partly, it reflects that people would not have wanted him near in any case.

His stance is one of shame. His actions express shame. His words call for mercy,

God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

His only source of feeling okay is if God grants it to him for free, *gratis!* And this is what he gets. This is Grace.

This man goes home justified, Jesus tells us. His relationship with God made right by God's forgiveness.

William Muehl, Emeritus Professor at Yale Divinity School points out that the tax collector looks good because he is in a two person line-up and the other person is one of our stock villains.

However, if this prayer is the only one the tax collector ever recited for the rest of his life, if the sense of unworthiness stayed with him and dominated the rest of his life, then he is, also, hardly the sort of person we would want to identify with.

To finish let me give you two comments:

Alyce McKenzie says,

There comes a time when we need to trust that we are forgiven and accept God's grace to move beyond regret, remorse, and acknowledgment of our sins into...a state of being blessed so that we can be a blessing to others. We certainly can't do that if we are arrogant like the Pharisee. But neither can we do it if we remain habitually mired in a sense of our unworthiness like the tax collector.

And the more strident Meda Stamper has a challenge for us.

The challenge for us perhaps is to notice that we rather like being exalted. We might think of it as the satisfaction of a job well done or a duty fulfilled. And we might begin to believe that things we do (giving money to the church, doing charitable activities, being upstanding members of society, making a well-deserved salary) or don't do (being thieves, rogues, or adulterers) really might justify us, at least a little, might make us a bit better than those who fail where we succeed. But until we let go of that notion, the parable suggests, we will not go home justified. We will be prisoners to our own small righteousness. And we as a church will present a face to the world that does not invite it in.

Jesus told the parable to some who were self-righteous and regarded others with contempt. They need to change their focus from arrogance to humility. Or in the words of our church values – to change from a self-centred to a Christ-centred life.

But the parable is also for those who refuse to trust that God can work in their lives because of who they are and what they have done. They too can find grace, mercy and peace.

Chris Mitchell, 23 October 2022