

Luke 18:9-14

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[0 : 0 0] The story goes of an inmate, James Rynason, who was released from prison not so long ago. He was cleared of his crimes and was sent home. He could barely contain his relief on that day.

! But there'd been a mistake. In an identity mix-up, he'd been acquitted when actually his cellmate should have been released instead.

But Rynason could hardly believe his luck as he got home to his wife, Scott Free. But they'd got the wrong man. He was the bad guy who was released as the good guy.

The relief was short-lived though when he got home to his wife because she didn't share in his joy in him being released. Bundled him straight back in the car and drove him back to the prison. She'd saved them the embarrassment, hadn't she? Because it had been a huge mistake.

They'd released the wrong man. They thought the bad guy was good and they thought the good guy was bad. Now we've been looking at some parables, haven't we, in Luke's Gospel on prayer.

[1 : 1 0] And we listen in on two prayers here, don't we, by two other men in this parable that Jesus tells. But surely there's been a mix-up, hasn't there?

This parable should feel like that story about the jail story. It should shock us that Jesus seems to have got the wrong man here.

If you just skip to the punchline in verse 14, Jesus says, I tell you that this man, the tax collector, went down to his house just to fight.

See, Jesus' original listeners would have assumed, Hang on, Jesus, you've made a mistake there, haven't you? You've got the wrong man there, haven't you, Jesus? In their eyes, God was saying, wasn't he, that a man is known by all to be all wrong is all right.

And we want to know, don't we, why Jesus Christ makes this crazy character judgment. Why is it that there are people like this tax collector who are acceptable to God?

[2 : 1 8] Why is it that there are people in heaven that we never expected to see there? People that we have written off, that God has written in. What sort of a person is it that God accepts, and what sort of person does he reject?

Well, it's been said before that if you want to know the character of a man, listen to his prayers. And never has that been more true than in this case. Because in these prayers lie the answer to our questions.

Because in their prayers in this parable, we see three reasons why Jesus has not got the wrong man here. We see in their prayers their view of themselves, of God, and of others.

So, three things. The first thing, we see what they pray about themselves, don't we? We see what they pray about themselves. Why hasn't Jesus got the wrong man? Well, one mistake in answering that is to assume that the Pharisee, who is rejected, prays about himself too much.

And that's why God rejects him. But notice, actually, that both men pray about themselves, don't they? So that's not wrong. That can't be the problem. So maybe it's because the Pharisee prays good things about himself.

[3 : 3 9] I've done this, and I've done that, Lord. Or he's kind of too puritanical, isn't he? He's too pious. And no one likes a goody-goody, do they? But I think we need to be careful on that as well.

Because, in fact, what Jesus tells us here is a brilliant prayer. It is a standard prayer that Jesus' listeners would have assumed was right and good.

His prayer, actually, is pretty biblical. And the Psalms encourage God's people to affirm when God has helped them to do the right thing.

And the Psalms of innocence. You can see them. Moses teaches the people to pray. When you go into the Promised Land, and when you've given a sacrifice, pray like this.

I've not sinned in any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them. I've not eaten of the tithe that I've given. I've obeyed the voice of the Lord, so look down and bless your people.

[4 : 37] That's Deuteronomy 26. And that prayer that Moses taught sounds a bit like this guide, doesn't it? Thank you, Lord, that I give tithes, and that I've passed twice a week, and I've not been unjust, and I've not committed adultery, etc.

You see, in the prayers of the people, we are to thank God for personal holiness. And that's not wrong. It's right to pray, Lord, thank you for helping me through that temptation.

Thank you for helping me to do the right thing. And his piety isn't wrong either. As you read the commentators on these passages, they love pointing out that the Pharisee has gone beyond the law of the Scriptures.

So he fasts twice a week, doesn't he? When actually they only have to fast once a year, the Day of Atonement. And he tithes all he gets, rather than what was required.

And we think, don't we, what a goody-goody. But actually, you forget that there are other characters in the Bible that tithe more and fast more than him. And yet, we don't kind of slag them off, do we?

[5 : 47] Just as an example, earlier in Luke, we see Anna, the prophetess. Who is in the temple, not just praying and fasting twice a week, but every single day.

And we don't villainise her for that. No, it's too easy to play the pantomime villain card on the Pharisee, isn't it?

And actually, it's easy to do that with each other. When there is someone in your church, and you see them, and you think, you know, actually they are living a holier life than me. And they are doing things that I know I should be doing, and they're not doing things that I know I shouldn't be doing.

And what we do is, we make an excuse with that, don't we? And we say, they're just such a Pharisee. They're such a Puritan. But that is not the problem with this man.

It's not him saying that he's innocent of adultery, or that he really is innocent of those things that he mentions. It's not that. The problem is actually that a legitimate prayer, thanking God for victory in temptation, has gone off.

[6 : 56] His good and healthy piety has gone rotten, because his piety has turned into pride in self, hasn't it?

And a disdain of others. And we know that, because Luke tells us this parable, Jesus told it, verse 9, it was for those who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous. You see, his piety, and his godliness, and his obeying the commandments of God, would have been a wonderful thing in God's sight.

He would have delighted in that, had he not been proud of it. His piety would have been a wonderful thing in God's sight. But that is what has happened to this Pharisee.

Good piety has corroded into pride. Into this prayer of self-congratulation, hasn't it? And if we kind of think that, that's not like us.

We're not like that. There's something else we need to see about these prayers. There's a prayer about me here, but secondly, the prayer about others. What the prayer shows about what they see of others.

[8 : 08] Now, again, notice, both men pray about themselves. But also, both men pray according to their relationship with others.

Do you notice what Jesus says? And both of them pray at a distance from others. Do you notice that? So, the Pharisee, we're told, prays by himself.

And the tax collector stands far off, doesn't he? Both of them are away from others. Now, we can imagine them in this story, both at one of the two corporate prayer times that would have been in the temple, morning and evening.

And so there would have been other people around. And both of them distanced themselves from other worshippers. But they do it for very different reasons. The tax collector feels a keen sense of unworthiness.

Of being in conversation with God. And in being in the midst of God's people. He's really embarrassed about that, isn't he? In his prayer, he uses the definite article, which doesn't come out so well in the English.

[9 : 21] God, be merciful to me, the sinner. He singles himself out as the least significant person in the temple there that day.

As the least deserving. He is the guy, isn't he, who skulks in halfway through the surface. Sits at the back and leaves before the end. The guy that we think wouldn't darken the doors of a church. The person that we write off. He is like the prodigal son, three chapters earlier in Luke. Who stays away from his father's house, doesn't he?

Out of shame. I don't deserve to be with my father's people. And it's not a false modesty. He just knows when he hangs around God's people, he feels convicted of his own failures.

So he keeps a distance from them. Yet the Pharisee keeps his distance for the opposite reason. Not because he esteems others, but rather he disdains them.

[10:26] And he is like the older brother in the prodigal son story. The one who stays away from the party at the end, doesn't he? Because he disdains his brother.

And this is where pride really shows itself, actually. Tim Keller, in his book called *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, explains how this is where pride really rears its head.

When our pride gets exposed when we're with others and in relation to others. He says, pride gets no pleasure out of having something.

Only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that we are proud of being rich. Or clever. Or good looking. But actually we're not.

People are proud of being richer. Or cleverer. Or better looking than others. He says, if everyone became equally rich. Or clever. Or good looking.

[11:28] There would be nothing to be proud about. And he's right, isn't he? And it's the same in the Christian life. And in prayer. Notice how the Pharisees' prayer.

The whole of it. Is a comparison with others. Thank you Lord that I'm not like other men. That's how it starts off, isn't it?

And actually when you think about it. God's law. And holiness. And true Christian living. Are not on his mind. Because holiness for him.

Has become a competition. And he's not bothered actually about adultery per se. Look at what he prays about. Adulterers.

He doesn't care about extortion. And injustice. Does he really? But rather extortioners. And unjust people. He's not actually here thanking God.

[12:27] For helping him keep God's law. He doesn't thank God. For his victories with sin. Rather he thanks God. For other people's failures with sin. Doesn't he?

One of Aesop's fables. Has a man who prays. Lord God. Look thou with favour upon me. And my wife. And my children. And upon no one else. And a man who's next to him.

Prays quietly. Lord God. Confound that fellow. And his wife. And his children. And nobody else. But that is what happens. Isn't it? When legitimate piety.

And a love of God's law. Turns poisonous. When pride. Makes it into a competition. With others. And Jesus is telling us here.

Isn't he? That prayer. That prayer. Can never be a solo thing. What I mean by that. I don't mean you can't pray alone.

[13:27] Of course you can. But that you can't pray alone. As if God hears you alone. If that makes sense. This Pharisee.

He's so busy. Isn't he? Looking down on things. And on other people. As long as he's looking down. He cannot see what is above him. And he is cutting himself off from God.

God. The Pharisee. Excludes others from God. But thereby. Excludes himself from God. And when he writes them off.

He writes himself out. We see the prayer about me. The prayer about others. And thirdly. The prayer about God. Prayer about God. And we've seen what they pray.

And where they pray it. In relationship with others. But what about how they pray it? And I think this is really interesting here. Because Jesus gives air time.

[14:23] For different things. In these two prayers. A lot of air time. Is spent on the content. Of the Pharisee's prayer.

Did you notice? On what his mouth says. What are the words that come from his lips. The tax collector though. Has far less time on that. Doesn't he? Lord.

Be merciful to me a sinner. A very very quick prayer. But the tax collector. Gets a lot of air time. On how he prays. On his posture.

Doesn't it? We get this vivid picture. We know that he's standing there. We know what his eyes are doing. That he doesn't look up to heaven. We know that he swings his arms. And he beats his chest.

On posture though. The Pharisee has one word. Standing. And that is really important. Because even though. They don't speak directly.

[15:19] About God. Their posture. Shows us what they're thinking. About him. And we see here. That Jesus is telling us. What is more important.

About. Important to God. In prayer. Is attitude. Isn't it? Attitude in prayer. And posture before God. Is more important. Than the solid.

Biblical content. Of a prayer. Our posture. And our attitude. And our heart. Towards God. Matters more to him. And what we think of him.

So the Pharisee. Thinks that he can. Sort of chum up with God. And set the world. To rights with God. Doesn't he? Oh Lord. You are so. You and I are so different.

From the rest. I love being in your gang. Lord. Just wait till we get to judge. All these sinners. And we can do that. When we think God is like us.

[16:13] That's what we do. Isn't it? We couch up to powerful people. And we flatter them. And we love praise from influential people. We're drawn to people. Who give us self-importance.

But God doesn't need any of that kind of fawning. God doesn't respond well. To presumptuous. Pally. Flattery.

From his creatures. Doesn't need us to patronise him. Actually what he wants. Is a posture of honesty. Sheer honesty.

Like the wrong man here. Like the tax collector. He is as honest as possible. Isn't he? Have mercy. I'm a sinner Lord. See. They both have an image of God in their minds.

One image of God is assumed by the Pharisee. But it's a wrong image. And the other image of God. Is hoped for. And not presumed on. By the tax collector.

[17:11] And that is the right image. But God does not respond well. To grandstanding. To pride. And self-congratulation. But he is a God.

Who mercifully answers. Honest. Unneedy prayers. For forgiveness. And so what he requires from us. When we come to him. In prayer. Of everything that he requires from us.

Is the grand sum total. Of absolutely nothing. Nothing. Actually of less than nothing. D.L. Moody says. God sends no one away empty.

Except those who are full of themselves. And what he wants for you in prayer. Is for you to admit. That you have absolutely nothing before him. That all you can bring him.

Is your failure. And your sins. Pharisees. Back in the day. They were highly respected. They were heavy influences.

[18:10] On Jewish culture. And of worship practice. On prayer. On bible study. On godly piety. Tax collectors. On the other hand. Were sellouts.

To the pagan political elite. They were classed as dishonest thieves. They were nuisances. One of them is an angel. And the other. Is a devil of a man.

Isn't he? But has Jesus got the right one? Well. Their prayers say it all. And our prayers say it all. About me. And about what I think of others. And about what I think of God. Do you know. This is one of those parts of the bible. Isn't it? That we always think.

Someone else could do with hearing. We kind of sit here and think. I wish they were here to hear this. You know. That person is so proud. They really need to hear this stuff.

[19:03] But actually. We run the risk of leaving. At the end of today. Don't we? And praying a prayer. Lord God. I'm so glad. That I'm not like other men. And I'm not like this Pharisee. And I'm actually sounding.

Just like him. It would be ironic. If we left this meeting. Feeling proud. That we're not proud. But as Augustine said.

It was pride. Pride. Pride. That changed angels. Into devils. But it's humility. That makes men. As the angels. Let me close with a short story.

There was a minister. In New England. In the 1600s. A man called Thomas Hooker. And he fled. To the new world. From religious persecution. In England. And he accomplished much.

As a minister. The history books remember him. He helped establish. The city of Hartford. In Connecticut. He was a great man. Who did much for the church.

[20 : 05] When it came to the time of his death. He grew more and more ill. He was asked to give some last words. On his worries. For the future of the church. In New England. And he said. I've not got that work to do now.

I've already declared. The counsel of the Lord. You see. He was a man. Of great achievements. A great preacher. And a great strategist. When somebody in the room.

Stood weeping by his bedside. They came in. And said to him. Sir. Well. Now you are going to receive. The reward. Of all your labors. And he replied.

Brother. No. I'm going to receive mercy. He understood. Didn't he. That Jesus is the God. Who exalts the humble.

And who gives mercy. To the humble. And so. God has not got. The wrong man here. Has he. Or the wrong woman. Because there are people.

[21 : 02] In heaven. Who are there. That we never expected. To see. He is the God. Who writes people in. That we've written off. And even the best.

Among us. Even the godliest. Can bring nothing to God. Less than nothing. And anything we receive. From him. Is a mercy.

The tax collector. Standing far off. Would not even lift. His eyes up to heaven. But beat his breast. Saying. God be merciful. To me a sinner. I tell you.

This man. Went down to his house. Just to fight. Rather than the other. Let's pray. Let's pray.