

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL STORIES AND SIGNS JESUS THE STORYTELLER

## *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

Today, we will study a parable that is very familiar to most. And because it is so familiar and its characters so ancient we may miss seeing ourselves in the parable. To help us put this parable into a modern personal perspective, I will provide a few modern retellings of the parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Picture this:

**The Business Woman and the Woman on Food Stamps:** Two women go the grocery store – one drives up in a nice SUV and is proud of her administrative position. She walks in head held high carrying her Gucci bag. The other woman who lost her job six months ago when the plant closed gets off at the bus stop and walks the distance to the store with her eyes downcast in her old worn out Keds. As the two women wait in the checkout line, the business woman prayed “God, I thank you that I’m not like other women, lazy and on food stamps like that woman in front of me wearing those dirty shoes. I work for what I get! My taxes are paying for her food!” But the woman who was only able to buy a few necessities with her remaining food stamps humbly prayed, “God, thank You for providing these food stamps to feed my children. We don’t deserve your grace but I thank you for your provision.” I tell you this woman went to her house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts herself will be humbled, but the one who humbles herself will be exalted.

**The Man with the Older Truck and the Man with the Lexus.** Two men park next to each other on the street. The first in an older model Ford F-150, the other sporting an earring and a few tattoos parks a brand-new, Lexus. As the two men leave their vehicles, the man in the older Ford prayed to himself, “God, I thank you that I’m not like other men, materialistic showoffs, or like that man in the Lexus. I’ve worked hard to earn what I’ve got. From the looks of him, he purchased that Lexus with drug money.” But the man driving the Lexus, humbly prayed, “God, thank You for allowing me to borrow this Lexus to pick up my neighbor at the hospital. You have richly blessed me with your grace. I don’t deserve it.” I tell you, this man went home justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now with a couple of ways that modern-day men and women can quickly turn into self-righteous Pharisees on our mind, let’s turn to the specific story Jesus told remembering that it is dangerous

business to believe that you are ‘right with God’ when you are not. In fact, trying to justify yourself leads you to look down on others.

**Read Luke 18:9 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:*

This parable was the second one in **Luke 18** that Jesus used to impress upon us the right attitude for coming before God in prayer. Prayer is conversation with God. Our lesson writers remind us that one of the defining doctrines of Christianity is ‘justification by faith alone’. **Galatians 3:11 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup> *Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”* Jesus does not want us to live our lives thinking our own works (so-called righteous acts) justify us before the Father. Demeaning others never makes us look good in God’s eyes. **Matthew 7:12 (ESV)** <sup>12</sup> *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.* If our judging of others is not governed by this principle known by the world as the Golden Rule, we will become proud and critical, and our own spiritual character will be lacking.



Did you realize that self-righteousness can be disguised by words of gratitude?

**Read Luke 18:10-12 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’*

The Pharisees appear to be responsible for the transformation of Judaism from a religion of sacrifice to one of law. They were the developers of the oral tradition. They saw the way to God as being through obedience to the law. Today, when ‘church folks’ think of a Pharisee, we immediately see ‘red flags’ of hypocrisy. However, that was not the case in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees were the ‘church folks.’ In modern church, a Pharisee-type might be carrying his big Bible overflowing with sermons notes. And if you sit close to him, you see that his scriptures are outlined in yellow and green with all kinds of notations on the pages. He is always the first to give for a big project and everyone knows it. He prays very eloquent prayers before the people. He goes to service for the purpose of feeling good about himself but is that the right reason to go to worship?

One of the chief complaints that the world makes against the church is that it is filled with hypocrites. And we certainly consider the Pharisee in this story a hypocrite. The term hypocrite came from the world of Greek drama. It was used to describe the masks that the players used to dramatize certain roles. In antiquity, certain players played more than one role, and they indicated their role by holding a mask in front of their face. That's the origin of the concept of hypocrisy. All Christians struggle with ongoing sin. Outside observers of the Christian church see people who profess to be Christians and observe that they sin. Since they see sin in the lives of Christians, they rush to the judgment that therefore these people are hypocrites. If a person claims to be without sin and then demonstrates sin, surely that person is a hypocrite. But for a Christian simply to demonstrate that he is a sinner does not convict him of hypocrisy.

When we look at the problem of hypocrisy in the New Testament era, we see it most clearly displayed in the lives of those who claimed to be the most righteous. The Pharisees were a group of people who by definition saw themselves as separated from the normal sinfulness of the masses. However, when their behavior failed to reach their ideals, they began to engage in pretense. They pretended they were more righteous than they were. They gave an outward facade of righteousness, which merely served to conceal a radical corruption in their lives.

Jesus said concerning prayer in *Matthew 6:5 (ESV)*<sup>5</sup> *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”*

The ESV does not make what the Pharisee was actually doing as clear as some other translations do. For example: *Luke 18:11 (KJV)*<sup>11</sup> *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself...* Plummer says he ‘glances at God but prays to himself.’

The Pharisee majors in negative obedience. I am not this and I am not that. He reminds himself of the sins he has not committed. That kept him from seeing the sins he had committed. We develop patterns of obedience to petty rules (today we might say: I tithe, I attend service regularly, I am on committees... I, I, I) and we overlook the real issues in our lives.

The real issue is what does your life look like before the All Seeing Eye of God. The Pharisee is like the man who goes to the doctor and tells the doctor, “I feel fine.” But, if the Pharisee ever lies down on the examining table under the hands of the Great Physician, he will find out much differently.

We should pray ‘for our self’ but not ‘to our self’ like the Pharisee did. We need to be careful that we do not use prayer to reinforce our own prejudice like the Pharisee who was so deluded about prayer that he told God (and anybody else listening) how good he was. He was using prayer as a means of getting public recognition and not as a spiritual exercise to glorify God.

Humble pleading for mercy is the mark of divine grace.

*Read Luke 18:13-14 (ESV) <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

The publican repeatedly smote his breast, for he knew where his greatest problem was, and he called to God for mercy. The publican knew the enormity of his sins, but the Pharisee was blissfully ignorant of his own heart. The Pharisee's pride condemned him, but the publican's humble faith saved him.

In the Greek he really says, God, will you propitiate me? The word propitiate suggests the idea or need for appeasement before God but carries the idea further to being reconciled to God. The tax collector knows he's broken and unless God does something to fix his sinful state, he is in great trouble. In ancient pagan religions, as well as in many religions today, the idea is taught that man appeases God by offering various gifts or sacrifices. However, the Bible teaches that God Himself has provided the only means for propitiation. Remember those words of John the Baptist when he spoke of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry? *John 1:29 (ESV) <sup>29</sup> ... “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*

There are two men, two prayers, two destinations. Have you ever asked God to pardon you the way the ‘tax man’ did – through the merciful provision of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus? Are you hanging your hat on your religious observances by joining with a nice group of people who make you feel like everything is okay? Stand where the tax man stood – he doesn't even look up to heaven. He was set free because of the amazing mercy of God. I will conclude with just one more modern-day retelling of this parable of Jesus.

**The Casually Dressed Christian and the Christian in a Suit:** Two Christian men go to Sunday morning service and both sat on same pew, one a younger man dressed in jeans and a Polo shirt, the other an older man dressed in a suit and tie. The younger man in blue jeans prayed, “God, I thank you that I'm not like all these other Christians here today: ritualistic and traditional like this guy sitting on the other end of the pew who thinks he has to dress up to come to church. I'm authentic; I'm sold out for You; and I don't put on a facade by dressing up to come here.” But the older man in the suit and tie prayed, “God, I'm not perfect. I have failed you often. But, I love you and thank you for your Son Jesus. Have mercy on me a sinner.” I tell you, this man left the church service justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.