

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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[0 : 00] Yeah, so over the last few weeks, we've studied many of Jesus' parables, and we know what to expect from them. But today's parable is actually a bit different.

Because you see, in all the parables we've looked at so far, we've seen stories with various characters and other things that stand as symbols. We've seen farmers, shepherds, servants, sons, sheep, coins, fields, the list goes on.

And all of these had their meanings that could be understood by the people. Time and again, we've heard this phrase, earthly stories with heavenly meanings. And we've seen how they were often understood, even if the hearers didn't like what they were hearing.

At the end of the parable of the talents, we read that they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But this time, it's a bit different.

Because he doesn't couch it in symbols. Yes, there's a certain drama to how the story's told, but the characters are direct representatives of the people that are sitting there in front of him.

[1 : 15] Over the last few weeks, we've met these characters many times, sitting there in the crowd. But this time, they themselves are in the story.

This time, he's blunt and says it as it is. He doesn't mince his words at all. Our story tonight has two characters in it.

And I want us to look at who they were, what they thought of themselves, how they approached God, how they left.

And then finally, I want to look at what happened next. And so, let's meet our characters. A Pharisee and a tax collector.

And immediately, we've hit a big problem with understanding this passage. If we've been around church for any time at all, we know these characters all too well.

[2 : 14] We know that Pharisees are villains. And we know that tax collectors come good in the end. We know that Jesus had harsh words for the Pharisees and dined with the tax collectors.

But these are Christian New Testament stereotypes. We need to forget about all that if we're to understand the scandal of this passage. This parable hits home because it overturns totally what was expected in first century Judea.

Because these two figures would be well known within society. The first, the Pharisee. He's a respected religious leader.

He's an honored member of the community. The Pharisees are a religious group who are renowned for their teachings on the law of Moses. And their interpretation of it and application of it to the minutia of everyday life.

And they were particularly concerned about ritual purity. About doing everything possible to avoid anything that might make them unclean. Such as the other character.

[3 : 29] A tax collector. He's a hated and despised traitor. He's one of their own people. But he's collaborating with the occupying Roman forces.

He was probably very rich. Because they were notorious for embezzlement. Taking from their own people to give to the authorities. And taking their own cup to line their pockets along the way.

It would be very clear to Jesus' original audience. Who was the goody? And who was the baddy in this story? One was respected. The other hated. One gave to the poor.

The other stole and exploited. One was considered to be a good man. The other a sinner. So, if that's what society thought about them.

What did they think of themselves? Well, the Pharisee. He's proud of himself. And all that he's achieved.

[4 : 32] He's confident of his status in society. He thinks that his good deeds. His adherence to every last letter of the law.

Makes him a good man. And he's careful to avoid anything that might make him unclean. Presumably he's aware that he's not perfect.

But he considers that his failings are insignificant. They're totally outweighed by the good things that he does. And because he's so confident in his own status, he looks down on the others that he thinks haven't achieved that level.

He's the very definition of the phrase, holier than thou. We read in the first verse of our passage that Jesus is speaking to some who were confident of their own righteousness.

And looked down on everyone else. This is exactly who this Pharisee is. So, what about the tax collector? What did he think of himself?

[5 : 43] Well, he knows that everything they say about him is true. And more. He's painfully aware of how far wrong he has gone.

He's reminded about it every day. By the looks people give him. By the muttering behind his back. But even without these things, he knows.

We don't know how he got to this position. Presumably he had his reasons. Maybe he'd been in a desperate situation and just needed anything that would pay.

Maybe it was just meant to be a temporary thing until something more respectable came along. Or maybe he went into it with eyes wide open. He just wanted money and power and was willing to do whatever he needed to get it.

Either way, he's got himself into a position that he can see no way out of. He's comfortable, yeah. He's wealthy.

[6 : 44] But he's hated. But he's hated. He hates himself. And so, having looked at how both of these characters thought of themselves, how did they come to the temple?

How did they approach the worship of God? How they act is completely different. Because what they thought of themselves had a profound influence on how they came to worship God.

How that does it? How did they come to? First of all, we see the Pharisee. Confident. Proud. Boldly strolling into the temple. Standing apart from the crowds so that he could be seen.

He's putting on a display. Everything he says is about himself. His prayer consists of telling God and anyone that was listening how good he was and in particular how much better he is than that scum over in the corner but he carefully wraps it in the pretense of giving thanks to God but as well as showing how much he thought of himself his attitude here shows how little he thought of God yes he knew that God was good but he had brought God's goodness down to his own level he actually believed that it was possible that he might be impressive to God he'd made God so small that it seemed reasonable to try and impress him rather than just to bow down and worship in contrast to this we see the tax collector he approaches the temple hesitantly he's humble hiding away in a corner looking down at his feet he knows that he's an outcast from society but more than that he knows he is not worthy to come into the presence of God and his prayer is simple

God have mercy on me a sinner he confesses his sin and he pleads for mercy he doesn't compare himself with others he doesn't offer any mitigating excuses he doesn't bring up any of the good things that probably he had done anything that might make him look better interestingly he doesn't actually confess specific sins he knows that it's not just he is a good person who has done some wrong things but that his nature and identity is a sinner and he knows that he can do nothing to change this probably over the years he's tried and failed but he realises that his only hope is to fling himself on the mercy of God but if he has a low view of himself he has a very high view of God because he knows that God's goodness is transcendent he knows that he is not someone to be trifled with his reaction is the same as that of anyone who realises who they are and who God is we see this right back in Genesis when Adam says

[10 : 42] I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked so I hid or Isaiah when he has his vision of the Lord and cries out woe to me I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty or Peter in the boat when he cries out go away from me Lord I am a sinful man these are the natural reactions of people who have recognised the goodness and holiness and majesty of God and in contrast with that how depraved and broken that they really are and so he approaches God in humility asking for mercy and so having approached in different ways how do our characters leave?

well the Pharisee he left exactly the way he came nothing has happened nothing has changed and to be honest he's quite fine with that because he doesn't think he has any need to change he came proud of his status he left proud of his status he came confident in his good works and he left with that confidence unshaken he came with a disdain for others and left with the same prejudice he came with a small view of God and he left with that exact same view he might as well have stayed at home but things are totally different for the tax collector because we read in verse 14 that he went home justified he left changed he left a different man because God heard his plea for mercy and forgave his sin it isn't just God's goodness and holiness that is far beyond what we can imagine but also his grace to those who seek his mercy the Pharisee was the one who tried to be careful to avoid anything unclean but it's the tax collector who God declares to be clean and he wasn't just clean because God chose to turn a blind eye to his sin he didn't just brush it under the carpet he dealt with it

Jesus' listeners at the time they wouldn't have understood how they knew that God could forgive sins but they didn't yet know how he could but Jesus at this point is on his way to Jerusalem in a few days weeks at most he will die for the sins of the tax collectors for your sins for mine and he'll rise again to offer new life this doesn't mean that there weren't still consequences that the tax collector had to deal with in chapter 19 we meet Zacchaeus a real life tax collector who repented and he had a lot of things that he had to put right starting by making restitution to the people that he had cheated but before God his sin was dealt with the guilty verdict hanging over him was gone his status and identity had changed and like we heard about last week there would be much rejoicing in heaven over this sinner repenting but

I think a really important question for us to answer here is what happened next what happened to these characters after they had gone home obviously as they were just characters in a story they ceased to exist as soon as the story ended but if they had been real people what might have happened I think this is a really important question to look at because I'm aware that the vast majority of people listening quite probably all of you have already come to God in repentance Christians are already Christians and it's so easy to let a story like this just wash over us we know it so let's go back to our two characters one last time for the Pharisee life went on as before as we said nothing had changed in his life and quite possibly nothing ever would but in time who knows the book of Acts speaks of believers who belonged to the Pharisees indeed the apostle Paul himself was a Pharisee there was still time for the Pharisee to turn and repent so what about the tax collector could life carry on the same for him he was now justified he was righteous before God could he just go back to his old life if he was forgiven did it really matter what he did now well Paul that Pharisee turned apostle had something to say on the matter in Romans 6 he addresses this exact question shall we go on sinning and he has a bold answer by no means other translations put it of course not absolutely not or even God forbid it's completely inappropriate for him just to continue living his life the way he had been repentance that doesn't involve change it's not repentance at all at best it's just remorse and for us who looking back understand the price that bought our salvation as we remembered in communion this morning how can we take it for granted so much that we can say thank you for paying the price for my sin and oh by the way here's some more for you to deal with it would be completely unreasonable for him to just go back to his old life so does that mean he went on to live a perfect life that he never sinned again well

[18 : 33] Paul again has something to say about this in just the next chapter Romans 7 here he describes the struggle of warring desires of warring natures he says what I want to do I do not do and what I hate I do Paul confesses that he is still totally and utterly needy and dependent he may have had one of the most dramatic conversions in history he may be one of the apostles with the biggest influence in spreading the gospel around the world but he is still incapable of living a good life by his own strength time and again he finds that he does the very things that he hates so has nothing changed are we left still just trying our best and failing no the biggest thing that has changed is our identity sinner is no longer our identity as we sang earlier we are now a redeemed child of God who sins sometimes it's a subtle but profound difference because it completely changes who we are and it changes how we should think of ourselves and therefore it changes how we approach

God we still like the tax collector need to confess our sin to God both our general sinfulness and the specific places where we are aware that we have failed need to need to confess our weakness and our need to acknowledge that we can't do it on our own we need to confess to God that there are

sins that we struggle with and that we need him to give us the strength to resist temptation the strength to put to death daily the desires of our sinful nature and it may be that we need to confess these struggles to our brothers or sisters so they might help us in that fight but we also need to make sure that we don't get caught up by the thinking of the Pharisee that doing good things and particularly doing religious things will somehow impress

God we know that our salvation is by grace alone but do we sometimes feel that maybe going to the prayer meeting reading the Bible listening to some worship music in some ways might make up for some of our other failings they don't not at all oh yes they're good things they're things we should be doing they're things that may help us in the fight and in building and strengthening our relationship but just as our salvation was by grace alone so too is our ongoing sanctification but finally we need to rejoice in our salvation not just grovel in our sin yes we need to be aware of our sin but it should not drive us to despair but to worship

I remember the first time I read the fight by John White almost 20 years ago one line in the first chapter hit me he writes you are not given permission to crawl into God's presence but to approach him with your head held high I don't remember exactly what was going on in my life at the time but I still remember the joy that this line brought because our identity is not that of a sinner but of a sinner saved by grace and that is something completely different and so as we come to an end how have we come to worship God tonight what is our view of ourselves what is our view of God have we come thinking there is something that we can bring

God that we can somehow impress him or have we come knowing that we can bring nothing that we are wholly dependent on his grace whether for the first time or the thousandth time have we come knowing our weakness and failure and rejoicing in the wonder of our salvation just as we finish some lines from a song may I never lose the wonder wonder the wonder of the cross may I see it like the first time standing as a sinner lost undone by mercy and left speechless watching wide-eyed at the cost may I never lose the wonder the wonder of the cross grounds minus through the état of the sea in the

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