

True Humility: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Sermon · 20 October 2013

Sermon on Luke 18:9-14, preached on 20 October 2013 at Christ Church, Noida

Jesus is telling us another profound truth through His parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, read to us from Luke 18:9-14. This parable is all about true humility, about righteousness, and above all it is about God.

How will you respond if someone were to tell you that you are a humble person? Will you rejoice or consider it as an insult? I will explain what I mean in a while. I recall a recent conversation, during which I said a few nice things about someone. A person who was near me whispered in my ear, "This person hates you. Why do you have to say all that?" I see two things here. This person, on the one hand, was offering me a back-handed compliment for trying to be humble, and on the other hand was telling me I am a fool. All I could do was to whisper back, "Please read your Bible." We are living in times in which most people, inside the Church and outside of it, suffer from the 'I, me and mine' syndrome. People look at humility as a joke, a behaviour of a weak person, rather than seriously pray to God for this virtue. In a culture that tells us it is normal to be selfish to the point of excess, humility almost seems like some kind of personality disorder.

However, Christians are unavoidably confronted with the subject of humility in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). Jesus spoke the parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector to tell us what it really means to be humble, humble in His sight. When we read Luke Chapter 18 carefully, we cannot but notice the remarkable order in which the Scripture is arranged, evidencing the fact that it indeed has been inspired by God. For example, the chapter starts with Christ instructing us that people always ought to pray. It then moves into two examples of prayer: one, an unrighteous judge, the second, a self-righteous man, a Pharisee.

Like all His teachings, this parable of Jesus also can be interpreted both in simple terms and also in a more involved manner.

In this parable we are told that two men went to the temple. This is good, people ought to go to Church. One can safely assume that both of them believed in God, which is also good. Both the men then began to pray, another good action by them; remember Christ told us at the beginning of Chapter 18, that "men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). But something is still not right in this whole scenario. May be something is not right with what they were praying about.

We are told that the first man was a Pharisee. Pharisees were zealous for the law, believed in the Word of God and the God of Israel. They supported the temple and its sacrifices. The Pharisees graduated to leadership of the religious world, but added their own traditions and interpretations to the Law of God, which became the major bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees.

In verse 11 we read that the Pharisee "stood and prayed", which was the correct bodily stance to take in those days. He did so "with himself" so that others would not contaminate him. He probably prayed aloud so that others could hear what he was saying in his prayer. But something was missing. Well, God was virtually obscure in his prayer. He mentioned God just once, while he mentioned himself five times. He was clearly much more interested in himself than the Lord. Here we see that spiritual pride lifted up the Pharisee. So what was missing in the Pharisee's prayer? All things that he mentioned were almost certainly true. Yet his dependency on God was just not there and he had no sense of sin. Not only that, any sense of need was also missing: it is as though this man was saying, "I have all the righteousness I need, I don't need anything from You, God!"

Now we turn to the Tax Collector from verse 13 onwards. It is important to understand just how despised tax collectors were in the times Jesus walked the earth. They were corrupt, accepted bribes, were unjust and extorted money from all and sundry; and the Pharisee described this person very accurately in his prayer. The Tax Collectors were despised because they were traitors

to the religion and handled Roman money, which bore Caesar's image and an inscription proclaiming him son of the divine Augustus — understood by many Jews as an implicit claim to divinity, and so a breach of the second commandment. They were traitors to God and everyone hated them. On the aside, nothing seems to have changed; we still do not like the Income Tax Department, we dread them.

In verse 13 we are told that this person stood "afar off" as he knew he would not measure up to any standard; be it of men or of God. He was so embarrassed in God's presence that he would not look up to heaven. He then "smote upon his breast", which is exactly the action of Jews during the Day of Atonement and was an indication of their repentance from sin. Therefore, through his action the Tax Collector was showing remorse for his sins. We also note that the Tax Collector had a prayer approximately one sixth the length of the Pharisee's. Jesus had warned (Luke 20:46-47) to beware of people who make long and loud prayers, and all those who make pretentious prayers. God loves short, dense prayers, with no wasted words, so that people get down to business with Him quickly, that is, to connect with Him and commune with Him.

Let us look at the format of the Tax Collector's prayer. He had the right addressee, God. He had the right subject: "be merciful." He had the right object: "to me a sinner." Here we see that he, unlike the Pharisee, had a clear sense of who he was before God, a sinner who needed saving.

The difficulty with a simplistic interpretation of this parable, however, is that we might as well end up praying, "Lord, we thank You that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church every week; we listen attentively to the sermon; we make financial contributions; and we obediently do whatever we are asked to do in the church."

In order to avoid the kind of self-congratulatory interpretation of this parable which the parable itself seems to condemn, it may help to note that everything the Pharisee said was true. But his prayer was all wrong. He has set himself apart from others by his faithful adherence to the law. He is, by any standards, a righteous person. So before we judge him too quickly, we might reframe his prayer slightly and wonder if we have ever uttered such a prayer ourselves. We may not have said in our prayer, "Lord, I am thankful to You that I am not like X, Y, or Z." But when we see someone down and out in his or her circumstances we might have prayed, "Lord, through Your abundant grace You have upheld me." If we really think about it, in essence we are making the kind of comparison the Pharisee was making. Effectively we are saying, "Lord, thank You that I am not made to undergo suffering as this person." As Luke states in his introductory sentence, the Pharisee trusted in himself only and missed God's true blessing. His prayer of gratitude, though it seems to have been addressed to the Lord, was really about himself. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own being, and completely fails to acknowledge any role of God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he possesses no means by which to claim righteousness. He has done nothing of merit; as a matter of fact, he has done much to offend the law of Israel. For this reason he stands back, hardly daring to approach the Temple, and throws himself at the mercy of the Lord.

Here is the essential contrast. One makes a claim to righteousness based on his own accomplishments, while the other relies entirely upon the Lord's benevolence. Rather than be grateful for his blessings, the Pharisee appears arrogant to the point of despising others. In his mind there are two kinds of people: the righteous and the immoral, and he is grateful that he has placed himself among the righteous. The tax collector, on the other hand, is not just humble but was desperate. He is too overwhelmed by his plight to think of, or to take time to, divide humanity into sides. All he recognises as he stands near the Temple is his own great need. He therefore stakes his hopes and claims, not on anything he has done or deserved, but entirely on the mercy of God.

I do not think it was an accident that this action took place at the Temple premises. On the grounds of the Church, you should always be intimately aware of who you are in the sight of the Lord Jesus Christ. There were, at the Temple, "insiders" and "outsiders", as it does in the churches of our time. But when Jesus died all this had changed. All people are levelled at the foot of the Cross. The gospels reported that the curtain in the Temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45), symbolically erasing all divisions of humanity before God. That act is prefigured in this parable, as God justifies not the one favoured by Temple law, but rather the one standing outside the Temple, aware only of his utter need for God.

This is what makes this parable so hard to interpret. For as soon as we fall prey to the temptation

to divide humanity into any kind of groups, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee. Whether our division is between righteous and sinners, or even between the self-righteous and the humble, we are doomed. Any time you draw a line between who is "in" and who is "out", this parable asserts itself, and you will find God on the other side and not on yours. Read this way, the parable ultimately escapes even its narrative setting and reveals that it is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and a desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is all about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly. Yes, as today's theme is phrased, our true humility is to know what we are in the sight of God.

At the end of this story, the Pharisee will leave the Temple and return to his home righteous. Nothing has changed for him; he was righteous when he came in and is righteous as he goes back. The tax collector, however, will leave the Temple and go back to his home justified, that is, counted righteous by the Lord. The tax collector makes neither a sacrifice nor any restitution. Yet he is justified on the basis of God's divine sanction and ordinance. When we read this parable again and again and try our hands at its interpretation we will find ourselves, yet again, with nothing to claim but our dependence on God's mercy. When this happens, and we forget for a moment our human-constructed divisions and stand before God, aware only of our need for His grace, then we too are justified by our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we are able to go back to our homes in mercy, grace, and gratitude. It is worth reflecting here that God gives grace to the humble and resists the proud (cf. James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5); all throughout history the maxim that God will humble those who exalt themselves and will exalt those who humble themselves has been seen repeated again and again.

Let me close this sermon with the story of a judge who was an active member of a church. On a Sunday when it came time for Communion, the judge was seen kneeling next to a man, a convicted thief whom the judge had sent to prison. In prison the convict had come to know Jesus and become a Christian, and started attending church services when he got out.

Observing this, a friend of the judge commented, "Is it not a miracle what God has done in that man's life?"

The judge replied, "That may be so, but it is a greater miracle that God has done in my life."

His friend was puzzled. But the judge went on, "I was raised in a loving home. I never went without anything; I had the finest education that could be provided. I think it is a greater miracle that God could get through to me and show me that I stood in need of a Saviour as much as that robber." That is humility in the sight of God, my friends.

Amen.