

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 18:9-14

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican is one of Jesus' typical parables in that there is a major reversal of expectations. The parable is a reversal because it's the Pharisee who is religious and cares about practicing his religion who is criticized, rather than the corrupt tax collector. The problem is that Christians tend to hear this as a fulfillment rather than a reversal of expectations because we tell it in a manner that is critical of the Pharisee. What needs to happen in telling the story is to convey its basic character as a parable that reverses expectations.

The prayer of the Pharisee is a confident and pious prayer. There is an unusual degree of confidence and even self-exaltation in the parable, but don't make fun of the Pharisee in the telling. Use the tone of a normal prayer of thanksgiving.

The Pharisee's posture is standing and opening arms in prayer. It is a prayer with significant volume so that others could hear him. It's a prayer of thanksgiving: "Oh Lord I thank you." There is no petition, no confession. The sound of the Pharisee's prayer is the sound of one who is giving thanks for the righteousness that he has been given by God. It is not a bad prayer. The Greek word at the beginning of the prayer is *eucharisteo*, eucharist.

The tax collector's words are the words of a sinner who recognizes his sin and is beating his breast. His prayer is a quiet prayer of humility. His prayer is short and therefore slow. The posture is either sitting or kneeling, not looking up, quiet and beating his breast. I suggest that as you tell the parable you do this action.

This parable was told by Jesus in the context of his ministry, and later by Luke and the storytellers who told Luke's story. The expectation in both contexts was that it would be the religious man—the Pharisee—who would be justified by God. The expectation is that the listeners will initially identify with the Pharisee and be alienated from the tax collector. This parable may even have been told originally to Pharisees.

Pharisees in Jesus' day were laymen who advocated and practiced rigorous observance of the law. They were observant. They even sought to go beyond normal expectations which is reflected in the Pharisee's prayer. To fast twice a week was not normal; once a week was as much as was expected in the first century. Later in the second and third centuries, two days a week became a custom, but in the first century two days a week was supererogation. Furthermore, a tithe on everything that the Pharisee made was also more than was expected. In the first century the norm for tithing was that some things would be excluded from the tithe. But this Pharisee tithed everything that he made. He was really good.

Tax collectors were hated in first-century Judea. They were regarded as corrupt and sinful men, because they were. They were hired by the Romans to collect taxes and the normal practice was that tax collectors would add to the required tax their own cut. By so doing they became very wealthy. Thus, they benefited from the Roman occupation. They were the administrators of the Roman tax system in the towns and cities of Galilee and Judea. Because they profited from this status, and because the tax system exploited the people, they were hated and were regarded as criminal and corrupt.

The tax collector's prayer has become known as "the Jesus prayer" in the Orthodox tradition: "Lord Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." In some monastic communities and parts of orthodoxy this prayer is prayed virtually all the time either consciously or unconsciously.

We can imagine that the listeners would have pictured these two men in the court of Israel, that is the inner court of the Temple. They would have imagined the Pharisee, well forward in the middle of the courtyard, standing where he could be seen, and the tax collector, sitting or kneeling, probably facing the wall, and as far away as possible, hiding himself from public view.

The overall impact of this parable is then a kind of shock. That the tax collector would go to his home justified is a complete reversal of expectations. So the question is, "Why?" Why would he be seen as righteous in the eyes of God rather than the one who is clearly righteous? Jesus' comment is an explanation of this: "Those who humble themselves will be found righteous and will be exalted, whereas those who exalt themselves will be found as sinners."

So this is a parable that invites everyone who to reflect on their own claims to righteousness and goodness and whether that puts them in a position of justification and righteousness with God. What are the dynamics of recognition of our own sinfulness, of our need for mercy? The implicit recommendation of the parable is to humble ourselves before God and to recognize our dependence on God's grace.

This parable was addressed to folks who were religious and confident of their goodness in the eyes of God. So tell this in a way that invites your listeners to reflect on their own position in relation to God and their true sources of both humility and of righteousness. The dynamic of this parable is to shock people into thinking. But that dynamic depends on our identifying with the Pharisee.