

Jesus the Storyteller: The Pharisee and the Tax-Collector, Luke 18:9-14

Story of getting pulled over by police officer on my 17th birthday. Hoping for mercy, but unfortunately I got justice. If we want mercy not justice for a small traffic violation, how much more so God's mercy not Gods' justice for our cosmic violation? All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. We all have rebelled, self-centered, turned from God's rightful ownership of our lives to make ourselves rulers.

God is a God of Justice

Isaiah 30:18

For the Lord is a God of justice.

Galatians 6:7-8

⁷ Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction

Revelation- God's judgment being poured out on the earth.

Now the good news, is that God is infinitely more merciful than that officer that day.

Exodus 34:6

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

Psalms 145:9

The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.

Ephesians 2:4

God is rich in mercy

So the million dollar question: *What makes the difference between whether I experience the mercy of God or the justice of God?*

That's what this parable is all about. In the parable there is a contrast between two approaches to God- the approach of the **Outside in vs. Inside Out**. Only one of them experiences God's mercy.

Outside In Approach

¹⁰ Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed:

"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

Pharisee- Now we are conditioned to think of the pharisees as the bad guys because we've heard these stories or we are watching Chosen. But we need to understand that to Jesus' audience these were the good guys. They were the backbone of religious society; they were patriotic; honest in business; no doubt this guy was faithful to his wife; Religious devotion: memorized God's Word, average Christian can't name all the books in the Bible, let alone recite

what they say, average Christian goes 2x a month...they didn't miss a day, generous- average Christian gives only 2% of their income. The fasted 2x a week, most Christians fast no more than once a year. They were far more zealous and devoted to their faith and fidelity to God's Word than anyone of us. These were the good guys. But for all his goodness and his devotion on the outside there was something missing on the inside- examine his approach.

Luke 18:11 He stood by himself to pray...tricky translation, the Greek preposition here is ambiguous, could mean- by himself, or some versions have he "stood and prayed with himself." Both

"Prayed with himself"- Have you ever heard prayers where the prayer is really an excuse to say something we want to say to others. God is sort of a prop. Well God is sort of the prop for his own **self-promotion**. I'm so impressive, I'm so worthy. There is no praise of God, recognition of God's goodness, confession of sin, no dependence, no expression of need to God.

"Prayed By Himself"- He moved away from everyone else, we see this in how he prayed- "I'm not like all these other people." His physical distance reflected his spiritual and relational separation. He saw himself as superior. If the prayer with himself is self-promotion, prayer by himself is **self-comparison**. I'm not like them, I'm better, I have the moral high ground. Now before we judge this pharisee for this- we all have a heart tendency to compare ourselves to others to justify ourselves. From a young age I grew up in the church- I'm glad I'm not like those non-Christian kids who don't go to church, curse and watch bad movies. When I left my faith as a teenager, I'm glad I'm not like those Christians who think they are better than everyone, I'm real, down to earth, I don't judge people like they do. The poor judge the rich just as easily as the rich judge the poor, black or white, across political spectrum. This self-comparison and judgmentalism is at all-time high. Tribalism- fueled by the forced isolation, social and political issues of our day, and news and social media sources that turn it up to 10. We love our own echo-chambers that always agree with us and feed our sense of superiority over others...each believing they have the moral high ground.

The problem with the pharisee is not that his morals were wrong. It's not that he lacked zeal or devotion to God. He had all that... the **problem with an outside in approach to God is that it is self-justification, blindness to our deeper heart sins** like pride, judgmentalism, despising others. What makes me worthy before God, what makes me righteous, what makes me an acceptable candidate for God's mercy is my own right thinking, right morals, right effort.

To the surprise of the listeners- This pharisee v.14 left not justified, not right with God, not a recipient of God's mercy. He left that temple with the same heart in which he came in- hard heart, self-righteous, judging heart. "His prayer was blown back in his face like smoke. He asked nothing of God, and nothing is what he gets. He asked for no mercy and so no mercy did he receive." "What makes many people miss out on eternity with God is not their badness, it's their goodness."¹

¹ Quotes from Lon Solomon and Tim Keller

Inside out Approach-

¹³ *But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."*

The tax collector would have clearly been the bad guy to the listener. When Jesus said "tax collector" there may have been an audible "BOO." Kind of like if I mentioned the Dallas Cowboys. Tax collectors were Jewish people who worked for the Roman oppressors to extort their own people for money. Read an article recently about the Avocado Cartels in a region of Mexico. The Cartels are taking over avocado farms through threats, shaking down and exhorting farms by making them pay taxes to them. Makes your blood boil doesn't it? These are the tax collectors of Jesus' day.

The tax collector had a completely opposite approach. Instead of looking at his external righteousness to determine his internal righteousness before God, he first looked in his own heart. Instead of self-promotion and self-comparison- There is honesty and humility. His posture says it all- He stood far off, couldn't even lift up his eyes to God. He was filled with sorrow. He saw his sin for what it was, against a holy, perfect God and against people made in the image of God. One sentence to his prayer- "God be merciful to me, a sinner." That's it. No comparison to others, no self-justification, no list of works. Just an appeal for God's mercy. Much to the shock of the listeners- it was this man who left justified, declared righteous, the recipient of the mercy of God.

Now the key to unlocking the theological significance of this parable is to understand what this tax collector asked for. Our translation is "have mercy on me." Play the game mercy...once you are defeated you say mercy...the other person relents from further pain. And that's the usual Greek word used- *eleeo*. That's not this word- it's the word- *Hilaskomai*. Hang with me here... This is the word that means "to make a sacrificial substitute". Once a year Israel's high priest would take a lamb on behalf of the whole country and he would lay his hand on the head of the lamb and slit its throat, then collect its blood and pour it out on the altar, at the mercy seat. And it was saying that God's justice against sin was poured out on the pure substitute instead of the sinner. It was the word that Paul uses in Romans to describe what Jesus did in our place on the cross. This tax collector was not just asking for God to give him mercy, He was asking for a substitutionary atonement, someone or something worthy to take his place to satisfy the justice of God against him. As one pastor said, "The tax collector walked in with a list of sins a mile long and walked out with the spotless record of Jesus Christ credited to his account."²

I want to go back to the question I asked at the beginning- The million-dollar question for you and I- **What makes the difference between whether I experience the mercy of God or the justice of God?** The mercy of God comes from the Inside Out, not the Outside in approach.

Three things we can apply from **the Inside Out Approach** of the Tax Collector.

² J.D. Greear insight from sermon on Luke 18:9-14

#1 We must come to God humbly and honestly.

Unlike the pharisee, the tax-collector came with a deep sense of his own sinfulness and brokenness before God. He comes without excuse, without comparison, with authentic ownership of his own mess. This is the heart attitude that God loves.

Isaiah 57:15

For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

Psalm 51:17

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

This is completely counter-cultural from the self-love, self-esteem culture we have. We are told that we are perfect just the way we are, innocent. That saying anything about ourselves like this is psychologically abusive and self-loathing. But Scripture says the opposite. Those that are the healthiest, those are the most kind, self-giving, loving and humble are those who know that they are a glorious mess. Tim Keller- *“The Gospel is this: That we are more sinful than we ever dare admit and at the same time, in Christ, we are more loved and accepted than we ever dare imagine.”*

#2 We must come to God empty-handed.

The pharisee came with his trophies and ribbons of external goodness. Look what I have done! I’m worthy. The tax-collector came with nothing in his hands. He knew how helpless he was. This is why it is the drug-addict, the adulterer, the thief that is often closer to the saving mercy of God than the successful family man or woman who pays their taxes and says their prayers. We have to lay down our self-righteous trophies. I’m a good person, I have more Bible knowledge, I’m kinder than most, I’m more compassionate and forgiving. At the negotiation table of salvation we bring nothing and Jesus brings everything.

#3 We must come to God through our Substitute.

The tax collector understood that while God is mercy he is also justice. You can’t violate God’s law and walk over God’s goodness and then just say...sorry and erase it all. He understood he needed a substitute. He may not have known the name Jesus but it is who he was asking for and it is what Jesus did.

Many people feel sorrow for the things they have done. But then they immediately turn to their own effort to pay back and do penance. 2 Corinthians 5:21 *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Psalm 86:5-7

⁵You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you. ⁶Hear my prayer, Lord; listen to my cry for mercy. ⁷When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me.

God's mercy is free, far-reaching and forever to everybody who seeks it and wants it. Come when you are down, when you are weak. When you don't have the ability. When you know you messed up. When you feel ashamed. Anyone who came like the tax collector came will leave like the tax collector left.

Communion