

The Pharisee & the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Introduction

The overall point of this parable centers on humility. But before we hammer out the concept of humility, we'll briefly discuss the context of the parable, interpret its meaning, and then move on to some application and further explanation of how humility is fleshed out in this parable.

The Context

As we see from the previous sections of Scripture, Jesus is still talking with his disciples, and others are identified along the way. Before beginning this parable, Jesus has discussed what the Kingdom of God is like, and then moves on to talk about persevering in prayer and having faith in God's justice. And for the next few sections, Jesus begins addressing how one is included in the kingdom of God. So as we move into this parable we are actually presented first with the reason the parable is given and to whom it addresses. We find that Jesus is speaking to those who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on others (most likely the Pharisees). Now that we have the context, we can move on to interpreting what is actually said.

The Meaning

Two individuals are presented: First, the Pharisee, who was considered to be a religious leader, teacher, and overall guide for the Jewish people. The Pharisees were considered to be a pious people. We see from many other passages that they were a devout but self-righteous, hypocritical group. In contrast, tax collectors or publicans were considered to be despicable traitors of the people and sinners not worthy of any honor. They were despised for their extortion and treacherous dealings. They were even grouped with pagans. *Matthew 23: 27-28, Matthew 18:17*

The Pharisee stands and prays about (or to) himself to God. He first thanks God that he is not like other sinners, and then declares his righteousness by stating that he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all he gets. The Pharisee does a great job of illustrating his works and self-righteousness before God and in relation to others. He believes he is simply stating the obvious and righteous truth about himself.

In contrast, the tax collector stands at a distance, and would not even look up to heaven, instead he bet his breast, historically a common sign of mourning and despair, and asks for mercy from God and confesses he is a sinner. The tax collector seems to have a genuine sense of confession and repentance and humility before God.

Jesus explains that the tax collector, not the Pharisee went away justified. The tax collector recognized his humble position before God and his need for mercy. He was a sinner declared righteous. The Pharisee simply reiterated his works righteousness before God and compared himself to others, and was no more righteous than before.

Jesus makes the overall point of the parable clear when he says that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." This is clearly depicted in the parable and reiterates the tax collectors justification.

The Application

Again, we see that the overall point of the parable is humility. And what exactly is humility? Humility can be defined as recognizing ones low position before a holy God. It involves, like the tax collector, recognizing God's perfection and our sinful position. Without Christ, we are stuck in our sinful state and have no hope of justification before a perfect God. Like the tax collector, we recognize our sin, and trust God's mercy given in Christ and we are justified completely in Him. *Romans 6:1-14, Colossians 3:1-4*

Specifically, the parable seems to deal with humility in two major ways:

1. Humility is necessary for justification. *Luke 18:14, Romans 3:21-24*
2. Humility is a necessary part of the believer's life, not only in our relation to God, but also to others. *Luke 18:14, Luke 17:7-10, 1 Peter 3:8-9, James 4:4-10*

Being humble is also likened to the state of being a child and the fact that one is told to receive the kingdom of God like a little child. *Luke 18:15-17, Matthew 18:1-4*

Conclusion

The Pharisee exalted himself and his self-righteousness, whereas the tax collector recognized his true sinful state before God and asked for mercy, and was thus justified. Jesus makes it clear that this is the type of humility that leads to justification. As well, we know that humility is vital in the life of the believer, not only in justification, but also in sanctification.