

Luke 18/9-14: THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

The Ultimate Man & Righteousness

A landmark parable which summarizes and encapsulates the key and contrasting attitudes towards God/Christ v oneself found throughout the gospel (and today) and which are critical for salvation or the lack of it. So it pulls together many of the most important themes in the Gospel – and indeed the whole Bible.

v9a The parable is occasioned by “some who were confident of their own righteousness”. Two seemingly opposite groups of people are amongst those who are often confident of their own righteousness: the religious (those who feel they impress, satisfy and merit something from God by their keeping the rules of their particular religion); and the irreligious (those who magnify their virtues and shrink their faults, and believe their essential humanity makes them fundamentally good). If (as believers or unbelievers) we are in any way confident of our own righteousness, if deep down we think that we are quite acceptable to God, we should take heed to this parable. Paul is an example for us here: like the Pharisee in the parable, he used to be very confident of his own righteousness, but he learnt after more than one humbling encounter with God (Ac 9, 2 Co 12) to “put no confidence in the flesh” (Pp 3/2-9).

v9b There is a tell-tale sign of whether we are confident of our own righteousness: we “look down on everybody else”. Self-righteousness (to give being “confident of our own righteousness” its plain name) is essentially proud: we take it upon ourselves to determine what constitutes being righteous and (to our not very great surprise but to our great pleasure) we find it in ourselves. But pride is essentially competitive: so we compare ourselves to others and find they do not have it, or do not have it in an equal or satisfactory measure. So we “look down on” them (on just about “everybody else”). If we feel superior towards others in any way, if we look down on them, let us also take heed to this parable: it is probably because we are confident of our own righteousness (self-righteous), and think that, because of who we are and the way we live, we are better than them. In fact, it is impossible to be self-righteous without looking down on others: note the “and” in v9.

v10 The parable introduces two men, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. Jesus could have chosen and contrasted two men from any walk of life or kept them more anonymous. But he chose a Pharisee (he had attacked the self-righteousness of Pharisees numerous times – they typified the attitude he wanted to expose by the parable) and a tax collector (one of the class of men that Pharisees consistently looked down on). In so doing he must have alienated the Pharisees even further. The two men go up to the same place (the temple) with the same purpose (to pray) – but in their hearts, and therefore in their standing before God, they couldn’t be more different. In fact, their status and destiny are absolutely and eternally different. Just so it may be the case between any two people today (even in a church meeting) who outwardly appear very similar (cf. 17/34).

v11 Just how proud self-righteousness is is shown by the Pharisee praying “about himself” (the NIV footnote says this could even be translated “to” himself!). And just how competitive proud self-righteousness is is shown by him comparing himself to “other men”. But his perspective was doubly faulty. First, he didn’t compare himself

to ‘good’ men, those who may on closer examination have been ‘better’ than him, but only to those who were obviously ‘worse’ and who thus made him feel superior in comparison: “robbers, evildoers, adulterers...this tax collector”. (There is something particularly distasteful about ‘prayer’ which measures your fellow-prayer alongside you as you pray!) Second, and critically, he compared himself with other (sinful) men rather than with God and the (sinless) life God expects from us (the Law is but a reflection of God himself – cf. Ro 3/23). No wonder he came out looking good – or so he thought, for this kind of pride in our hearts is more obnoxious to God than all the other sins mentioned (it keep us from God in a way other sin does not). A proud heart is complacent and smug (and ugly): “God, I thank you [as I’m sure you thank me] that I’m not like...”

v12 As proof of his righteousness, he even commends before God the minor areas of the law he was fulfilling: fasting and tithing (cf. 11/42). As we noted in ch 11, religion and religiosity (self-righteousness) imagines obedience in some (smaller) areas an excuse for disobedience in other (more important) areas. When we start – to ourselves or God – commending the good things we’ve done, we’re in trouble! Recognize the signs; stop it!

v13 The contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector could not be greater. This ‘sinner’ “stood at a distance”: he did not presume, or feel qualified, to come close to the temple itself. “He would not even look up to heaven”: he knew he was unworthy even to look in God’s direction, let alone to see him. He “beat his breast”, a customary way of showing grief and anguish (cf. 23/48): here, his felt grief at his inability to measure up to what God required of him. And the only thing he can say is, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”: he recognizes exactly and honestly what he is (a sinner) and that the only appeal he can make to God is a plea for mercy (because all he deserves is death – and, if God deals with him by dessert, he will die). But this is the most essential and important (true, pure and beautiful) prayer in all Scripture: until we pray this prayer we have not begun to deal with God; unless we pray this prayer, we cannot go on to pray any other. This prayer is the starting point of salvation, of a relationship and walk with God. And in one sense, we never cease to pray it. If ever we are uncomfortable to pray it, there is pride in our hearts that needs to be dealt with.

v14a Jesus then gives the startling verdict (shocking to the everyone like the Pharisee in the story, marvellous to everyone like the tax collector) – the one main truth that this parable is intended to convey: the tax collector went home justified before God but the Pharisee did not.

Justify/justification are important words in the NT and in the understanding of salvation. They sound like very religious/theological words but in fact were well-known words drawn from the law courts of the day. When all the evidence against an accused had been heard but the judge found no evidence/grounds to find him guilty, he would declare, “I justify you,” i.e. there is no charge/accusation against you that can stand, you are innocent in the sight of the law/judge, you are free to go. These are the marvellous, incredible, too-good-to-be-true-yet-are words that the Judge of all the universe speaks over the repentant sinner, one who prays, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. For when a man recognizes that he has nothing to offer God in return for his salvation but is totally dependent on God’s mercy, and when he throws himself on that mercy, God is able to forgive/remove his sin and consider/declare him

innocent/righteous on the basis of the sacrifice for sin (the payment of the penalty for sin) that he has himself provided: the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Through faith in Jesus, the repentant sinner (like the tax collector in the parable) is justified by God: grounds for all charges/accusations against him are removed, he is considered/declared innocent/righteous in the sight of the Law/Judge; he is free to go (there is no judgement to endure, penalty to pay). Justification thus includes but is more than forgiveness: his record is wiped clean; it is as if he never sinned; he has a new status before God.

But the proud, self-righteous person (like the Pharisee in the parable) is not forgiven or justified. He believes he is righteous, or that he can become righteous through his own efforts (i.e. justify himself: cf. 10/29), so he continues in his deception or his futile effort. He doesn't ask God to do it for him – & God doesn't. "For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin." (Ps 36/2) So he remains in it – guilty, judged.

v14b If v14a told us the point/outcome of the parable, v14b tells us why: God hates pride but loves humility. Jesus has already spoken these words in another context (14/11): there he meant before men; here before God. If we exalt ourselves before God (and men, because the first cannot fail to lead to the second), we will be humbled (perhaps, if God is merciful, in this life – otherwise on the day of judgement); but if we humble ourselves before God (like this tax collector), we will be exalted by God in his gracious salvation of us.

Although the word appears only once in this passage (v9), the key concept in this parable is *righteousness*. It is the need and desire for righteousness which motivates both men (one with misplaced complacency, one with true helplessness) – and indeed all men whose hearts are open to God. This was the great thirst that drove Paul, and he loved Jesus and his gospel not because Jesus rendered his lifelong pursuit of righteousness unimportant but because he fulfilled it! What changed was that Paul came to understand he could not become righteous by his own efforts (by keeping the law, by religious works) but only by the gracious gift of God on the basis of the death of Jesus and received by faith (Ro 1/16-17, 3/21-22(26); Pp 3/6,9). Righteousness is the key component of the gospel and salvation: grace is why God wants to give it to us, the substitutionary atonement is how he is able to, faith is how we receive it, but what it's all for, what he gives us as the result of it all is – righteousness!

When we believe on Jesus, God justifies us, i.e. he declares us righteous. Righteousness here means to be 'in the right with God' ('in the clear' / 'God 'e say 'im alrite'). Our sin is imputed to Jesus (he pays the penalty for it), his righteousness is imputed to us (2 Co 5/21). Because we are "in Christ", our status before God is that we are (like Jesus) righteous. [justification / positional sanctification / imputed righteousness / status]

Now, as we 'work out our salvation' (Pp 2/12f), made possible by the new heart/nature God has given us, and partnering with the indwelling Holy Spirit who helps us both 'to will and to do' what is right, we increasingly become/live what we are: holy and righteous (He 10/10,14; Ep 4/1; Pp 3/16; 1 Jn 1/8-2/2 vs 2/28-3/10). We are righteous *and* we become righteous! [sanctification / progressive sanctification / imparted righteousness / state]