

Paul And The Publican

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church
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“He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:9-14.

When the Gospels were written, some things were covered by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. On the other hand, some of the Gospels contain material not mentioned by the others. This passage in chapter 18 concludes what some have called the “great insertion” of Doctor Luke, some 9 chapters worth of material, which begins in chapter 9, and in which he brings to light many things not addressed by the other writers.

This parable was given near the end of Christ’s ministry, probably only a few weeks before the cross. The very next chapter contains events including the triumphal entry, just days before his death.

As Jesus finished His ministry, it grieved His heart that there were those, particularly among the leaders, whose understanding of the fundamental principles of the Gospel was meager at best.

The reigning high priest at the time was a Sadducee, a group which denied there is a resurrection. Imagine the head of your church not believing that anything followed the

grave! The result of that thinking produced an all-out focus on earthly, material things.

There were the Herodians, who supported the rulership of Herod, and became quite secular, political and materialistic.

There were the Zealots, whose mission in life was to oppose the Roman presence among them. Feverishly patriotic, they often resorted to violence and insurrection to accomplish their goals.

There were the Publicans, or tax collectors who were looked upon with contempt for their working for the enemy and their overreaching in garnering what was levied.

There were also the Pharisees. This word comes from the Hebrew *perushim* which means "separate ones." It was the orthodox or conservative branch of Judaism, probably originating from about 200 years before the time of Christ. They rejected any attempt to introduce Greek or Hellenistic thought and practice into their religion. When, during the time of the Maccabees, such attempts were made, the group who later became the Pharisees rose in revolt against those efforts. It was in the time of John Hyrcanus, a Maccabean ruler that the name "Pharisee" first appears. They wanted to "separate" themselves from the worldly regime of the times.

Because of this stand, the group underwent heavy persecution, but eventually it came to be seen that they were not going away, and were tolerated and grew stronger in influence. Herod the Great was smart enough to recognize that they had a great deal of power over the people, and so he didn't give them trouble. At that time, though, according to Josephus, the number of the sect was rather small, only about 6,000.

Several great teachers, among whom were Hillel and Shammai were prominent in the heritage of the Pharisees. The Pharisees looked to the future world, while the Sadducees looked to the present. The Pharisee sought to be "righteous," while the Sadducee wanted to "get rich and get along."

However, through the passage of time, misconceptions as to how to obtain righteousness crept into the thinking of the Pharisees. They began to believe that it was because of their own doing that they earned favor with God, and deserved a place in His kingdom. This, even though they had in their possession Scriptures such as

Genesis 15:5, 6. "Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he (Abraham) **believed** (or, "had faith"), and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Isaiah 64:6. "But we are all like an unclean thing, and **all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.**"

Jeremiah 17:9. "The heart is **deceitful** (this word comes from the same root as the name "Jacob") above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" As I've said before, the most provocative word in that verse is the first one, the word "the." It doesn't say the heart of some master criminal or despotic ruler who has practiced genocide is desperately wicked. It just says "the heart," which must include mine.

Make no mistake about it; the way to salvation presented in the Old Testament is by grace through faith, not of our own works. Paul, in the book of Romans, defends this position skillfully. But the devil led the Pharisees to ignore these foundational principles and instead believe that it was through their own works that God accepted them.

Realizing that this misconception controlled the thinking of many at the time helps us understand the New Testament in a proper light. There are some passages within the writings of Paul that might make it seem that the Law has no place in the Christian's life. There are some places where it seems Paul is absolutely against "the Law." That's not what he means!

Keep in mind that Paul was raised in the Pharisee tradition, which taught him to look to himself, his keeping of the Law and his "good deeds" as the means by which his salvation would be accomplished. Paul, before he met Jesus, is a perfect example of the Pharisee in this parable. In fact, I might be so bold as to say that **it might have been Saul/Paul who prayed that day** in the temple. It could have been him; no name is given in the account. But even if it wasn't actually Paul, it accurately represented his way of thinking at that time.

Paul himself tells us this. Notice how he describes his former theology. "If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh (that is, in the ability to achieve salvation on our own), I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin (like another "Saul" a thousand years before), a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Paul, the Pharisee, had exactly the same way of thinking as did the Pharisee in Jesus' parable.

Then, when Paul met Jesus, he gained a better picture of himself, and his need of Christ's righteousness. Paul in his later life graduated to the theology of the Publican in this parable.

Remember though, that when Paul speaks against "the Law" he is speaking against that way of thinking that presumes that it is by *your* obedience that you are saved. Both Old and New Testament make it clear that that way of thinking is incorrect. On the other hand, Paul also writes that the Law is useful, if one uses it "lawfully," that is, to point out what sin is. I Timothy 1:8. He has many words of praise for the Law, including declaring that it is "holy, just and good." Romans 7:12.

I'm glad that the narrative opens with the words "He spoke this parable to **some** who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." It was not everyone that was infected with the virus of this false theology. There were some who had it right (as this

story illustrates). But it was most unfortunate that those who should have been in the forefront in declaring the way of God had it wrong, and were leading people into the ditch of despair.

And, as often happens, when we think of ourselves as being pretty good as we are, we begin to look down on others who haven't reached the high standard of righteousness as epitomized in our lives. That's the importance of the word "and" in verse 9. Jesus was speaking to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous **and** despised others." The two concepts usually go together. People who look "to" themselves often look "down" on others. The word "despised" there means "to make of no account," or "to treat with contempt." It's as if he had "written them off," like they didn't even exist anymore. They were completely without value or standing.

When it says they "despised *others*," it means literally "the rest," or "everyone else." The people who thought this way didn't just despise a few people; they despised all others. The word here, *loipos* has been translated the "rest" (12x) and the "remnant" (4x).

The parable describes the Pharisee as praying "with himself." That phrase may mean that he prayed inaudibly, "*within* himself" but it also suggests that he was praying "to himself," which is really what he was doing. By thinking that his works qualified him for salvation, a role that God has reserved to Himself, he had put himself on the throne. He was taking the place of God, Who only is the One Who makes us righteous. It was a type of blasphemy and idolatry. In keeping with this wrong way of thinking, I guess you could say that it would be appropriate for him to pray "to himself." He was his own god!

Notice what he says. First, in his preamble, he says, "God, I thank you that I am not like the other men." Really he was saying, "God, **You should be thankful** that You're so fortunate as to have someone so perfect as me in Your house." He says, "I am not like other men." A more literal translation would be, "I am

not like the rest, or everybody else" (the same word as in verse 9). Let me ask you a question, and remember that the word Pharisee means one who is "separate." Is there a sense in which we should be "Pharisees"? Yes! The Bible supports the idea that we should be "separate" from the world and its vain pursuits.

But what began for them as an attempt to be "separate" in the sense of distancing oneself from worldliness migrated into a way of thinking in which the Pharisee thought himself righteous on his own merits and therefore "separate" in quality from all others. This type of Phariseeism we should never practice!

He begins by recounting all the bad things that he doesn't do. "I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector." In his prayer, he praises himself to God for all his accomplishments, in that he hasn't practiced the deeds of evil. Let me ask you another question. Is there anything wrong with refraining from the things included on this list? Should we understand from this parable that we *should* go out and practice extortion, injustice and adultery? Absolutely not! I think Paul had something to say about that view. "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" Romans 6:1.

What was wrong, then, in the Pharisee's attitude and his prayer? It was that he had ignored the inner aspect of obedience: his was a superficial checklist religion. He didn't comprehend the spiritual nature of true loyalty to God. True obedience has to do with the heart and not just the hand. David confessed this when he said, "Your commandment is exceedingly broad." Psalm 119:96. Jesus underscored this in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said "If you hate your brother you have committed murder." When Paul realized that true obedience involves the heart and mind and thought, he knew that of himself he could never reach the measurement of obedience. His attempts at fabricating righteousness on his own appeared pitiful and utterly inadequate when compared with the profound and penetrating nature of true heart obedience.

Also, the Pharisee had obeyed from an improper motive, thinking that by doing these things (or refraining from doing wrong things) he would earn a right standing with God and He would be forced to accept him. His was a tainted, selfish, proud style of obedience. Thus it was not acceptable to God.

As he prayed, his eye slipped over to another worshiper over in the corner, the Publican. As the Pharisee paraded before God all his attainments, and told Him how good he was in not doing wicked things, he couldn't help but say, "I am not like other men, even as this tax collector." It was as if he said, "This is what I'm talking about! This man, over here, this Publican (the word "this" Publican conveys utter disdain)—I'm not like him!"

"I'm not like him." Let those words echo through the chambers of your mind. Let their chilling accuracy sink in. Do you know what? The Pharisee was right—**he wasn't like him!** Sad to say, it probably was the only true statement in his prayer!

There was a time in his life that Paul wasn't like the Publican. There was a time in your life and in mine when we weren't "like him." We thought of ourselves as being pretty good. We congratulated ourselves in our righteousness by saying, "Look at all the things we don't do! We're not like *that* person."

The Pharisee went on to point out a few of his virtues. He fasted (pious Jews usually fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays), and he was scrupulous in his tithing, down to the leaves and seeds, according to what Jesus said in Matthew 23:23. But all of this availed him nothing, because God looks on the heart, not as man sees. What a tragedy that a man who went to church and engaged in prayer ended up lost!

Sad to say, there are still some who come to the "temple" to pray who are his descendants. God forgive us when the Church has put forth the wrong idea of how we become righteous! God forgive us when we have turned people off, and turned people

away by our “holier than thou” attitudes! It’s possible that the self-righteous behavior of one of the “Pharisees” in the Church has discouraged you in your walk. Let me remind you that we are encouraged to look to Jesus, not to others. I read in this story that the Pharisee looked at the Publican, but nowhere do I read that the Publican looked at the Pharisee. It says that he felt unworthy to look to heaven, but it doesn’t say that his eyes wandered toward the other worshiper that day. That’s when we get into trouble. Keep your eyes on Jesus, and don’t let the behaviors and attitudes of the “Pharisees” be a hindrance to you!

So, it might seem backward that the man who thought he was righteous was really wicked, while the one who thought he was the greatest sinner went home righteous!

In contrast, the Publican exhibited humility and lack of self-confidence in every part of his demeanor. There’s a lot of talk today about “body language,” and how your posture and gestures correspond with your verbal language. What can we learn from the Publican’s “body language”?

He stood “afar off,” demonstrating his consciousness of unworthiness.

He felt himself unqualified even to look toward heaven, so conscious was he of his need.

In contrition and agony he emphasized his desperate plea for help by beating his hand upon his chest and pouring out his soul to God.

He had no list of accomplishments. He had nothing to parade or present to God for his qualification. The only quality he could muster was his great need. Some time ago, Augustus was caught in a violent storm, and the only place of shelter he could find was a rough cave. As the storm thundered and poured outside, his mind pondered the theme of Christ our Rock, and shelter in the storms of life. The words of a song began to form in his mind. As he had no paper with him, he scribbled a few lines on a playing card he found on the ground. Thus was born the great hymn Rock Of

Ages (this verse is not included in some hymnals) which contains the confession

“Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless look to you for grace;”

The Publican had nothing with which to commend himself, but that was sufficient! He cried out “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” Most translations read that way; I don’t know why. It’s very clear that the definite article is included in his confession. “God be merciful to me **the** sinner.” He feels as if he’s the only or the worst sinner in the universe. This way of thinking began to grow in Paul’s mind as well, as he contemplated the wonders of salvation. Near the end of his life he categorized himself as the biggest sinner in the world. “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom **I am chief.**” I Timothy 1:15.

This will be the attitude of every true Christian. The paradox and miracle of the Christian’s pilgrimage is that the closer we come to Jesus, the more unworthy will be our appraisal of our own righteousness, and the more heavily we will depend on the righteousness of the Lord for our salvation. “The riper the wheat grows, the more it bows its head.”

Down the street from us a neighbor planted several acres in grapes. I can’t remember what he told me the weight of the crop was each year, but I was shocked at the tons of fruit that are harvested each fall. When the growing season starts, like now, first the leaves sprout out and the brown vines become clothed in green. The leaves grow broad and beautiful, and the leaves are about all you see; but it wasn’t to grow leaves that he planted grapevines!

Later, in the growth process, the fruit begins to develop. For quite a while, the leaves outshine the tiny droplets of the future fruit on their clusters. But later, as the days of summer

measure the season, the leaves begin to fade and die out and drop off, while the fruit stretches to its illustrious maturity. At last, hardly any leaves remain, but the bounty of the harvest awaits the happy farmer. So it is true in our walk. Like the Pharisee, there may be many "leaves" of boasting and self-confidence at first, but as Christ causes the fruit of righteousness to grow within us, there will be less and less of "me" and more and more of "Him." The genuine fruit of righteousness, which is love, in all its glorious ramifications, will be paramount.

How can we avoid the error of Pharisaical thinking? It was when Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road that he saw his true condition for the first time. It is by drawing close to Christ in our walk that we will be inoculated from the virus of pride. Isaiah, when brought into the presence of the King, cried out "woe is me, for I am undone." Peter, when confronted with the Lord Who controlled nature cried out, "Depart from me, for I am an unclean man." The closer we come to Jesus, the more we'll know that there is nothing good in us to recommend ourselves to God.

We'll realize the truth of the Scripture that says, "What do you have that you did not receive?" I Corinthians 4:7. We may be tempted to think that it's been by our own power and intelligence that we have become who we are. Someone might say, "I am a self-made man," or "I am a self-made woman." Really? If you're tempted to think that way, I have a few questions for you. Did you form the molecules in your mother's womb that became you? Do you manufacture the oxygen that is pulled into your lungs each breath to feed the tissues of your body? Do you supply the electrical current that paces your heart and conducts the signals from your brain to your muscles? Did you produce the energy and nutrients that find their way from your plate to your palette?

What do you have that you did not receive? Everything we have and are is a gift from God! When we let this concept

penetrate into our being, we will be sheltered from pride and self-sufficiency. Human pride and wisdom will be laid in the dust. And remember, what is true in the natural world is every bit as true in the spiritual life. What do you have that you did not receive? It was on this very point that Lucifer stumbled!

There is wonderful news today! "Thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." Isaiah 57:15. I don't know if the Publican ever had a chance to hear that Scripture, but he lived it.

There's an irony in the story. We read, "The sacrifices of God are a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, **you will not despise.**" Psalm 51:17. The Pharisee might despise the humble one, but God doesn't! Everyone else might look down on the one whose heart is broken in contrition, but God doesn't!

The word of our Lord is that the Publican's prayer was answered, and he went home "justified." In simple terms, he was forgiven his sins. He was given a restored standing with His Creator. The Judge above declared him "not guilty." Could there be anything of great worth than that?

So the question for you and for me today is, "Who are we in the story?" Is my attitude, my thinking, my theology more like the Pharisee? Do I think myself pretty good, at least better than most others, and that God is pretty lucky to have me in His care? Or do I recognize the total absence of anything good in my life on my own? Do I realize that without Christ I am forever lost? Do I long for His righteousness, and His proclamation that I am "Not guilty"? Like the Publican, we can today leave the "temple" justified. Will you pray his prayer with me today?