

“WHERE DO YOU PLACE YOUR TRUST?”

I. Introduction

A. When it comes to your standing with God, where do you place your trust?

1. This is the question that confronts us as we consider our Lord’s parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.
2. This parable makes it clear that there are really only two ways of answering this question.
3. You can be the like Pharisee, who put his trust in his performance of what God requires in his law.
4. Or you can be like the tax collector, who put his trust in God’s merciful provision for the forgiveness of his sins.
5. Those are the only options: your performance, or God’s provision.
6. You can think that God accepts you because of who you are and how you live.
7. Or you can humbly cry out to the Lord, saying,

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling.*

B. Like the preceding parable in this chapter, this parable teaches us something about the kind of prayer that prevails with God.

1. In that previous parable, the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus taught that we need to be tenacious and unrelenting in our prayers.
2. In this parable, Jesus teaches us that we need to be humble and contrite in our prayers.

3. If we approach God as the Pharisee did, with a prideful confidence in ourselves, our prayers will not be heard.
4. But if we approach God as the tax collector approached him, in humble reliance upon divine grace, we will find acceptance with the Lord.

II. The Pharisee: Trusting in Our Performance

- A. Once again, Luke introduces this parable by telling us the reason why Jesus told it.
 1. He told this parable to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”
 2. Based upon the parable itself, as well as what we are told elsewhere in the Gospels, this is probably a reference to the Pharisees.
 3. People who are familiar with the New Testament attach negative connotations to the name “Pharisee.”
 4. It would be an insult to call someone a Pharisee today.
 5. But this was certainly not the case when Jesus told this parable.
 6. On the contrary, when people heard Jesus speak of a Pharisee and a tax collector going to the temple to pray, they would have automatically assumed that the Pharisee was the one who was upright.
 7. Unlike some of the other religious leaders in first century Israel, the Pharisees were truly serious about keeping God’s law.
 8. They were the religious conservatives of the day.
 9. They were also very popular with the common people.
 10. It would have been quite a surprise for first century Jews to hear a parable about righteousness in which a Pharisee was cast in a

negative light, especially when that Pharisee was being compared to a tax collector.

- B. As we look at the Pharisee's prayer, one of the first things that stands out is his repeated use of the pronoun "I."
1. And all the things he has to say about himself are flattering.
 2. He has no sense of his sin, no sense of his need for forgiveness.
 3. He doesn't even ask God for anything.
 4. When you stop and think about it, this is not really a prayer at all.
 5. It is a celebration of self.
 6. The Pharisee's words make it clear that he really does trust in himself that he is righteous.
- C. Notice that this is true even though he thanks God for the kind of man he is.
1. While he gives God the credit for bestowing the righteousness that he sees in himself, his trust is not in God but in himself.
 2. In his mind, the thing that makes him acceptable to God is the righteousness that God has infused in him.
 3. He holds to the same doctrine that is set forth in the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which says that justification is based on actual and inherent righteousness, not about imputed righteousness.
 4. His confidence before God rests upon the righteousness that he sees in himself.
 5. Even though he thanks God for this righteousness, he clearly sees it as *his* righteousness.

6. It is a righteousness of his own that comes from the law.
 7. It is not the righteousness from God that depends on faith.
 8. In other words, it is the kind of righteousness that the apostle Paul said that he counted as rubbish, in order that he might gain Christ and be found in him. (see Phil. 3:8-9)
- D. Of course, it is true that God's grace produces a transformation in the life of every believer.
1. If we are truly united to Christ, our lives will bring forth good fruit.
 2. But none of the righteousness that God produces in us can be the basis of God's acceptance of us.
 3. If it could, then it would have been the Pharisee rather than the tax collector who went down to his house justified.
 4. But as the apostle Paul makes clear in Romans 4, in Christ God counts righteousness to people as a free gift, apart from their works.
 5. While everyone who has been justified is being sanctified, our sanctification can never be the basis of our justification.
- E. One of the reasons why the Pharisee places his confidence in his own righteousness is because he compares himself to other people.
1. He sees a righteousness in himself that he does not see in people like the tax collector.
 2. He is not notoriously wicked, like those who practice extortion or commit adultery.
 3. He even performs exceptional acts of piety, going well beyond what is required in the law.

4. But in saying these things about himself, he reveals that he does not really know himself.
5. He is ignorant of his misery as a sinner.
6. He is content with a righteousness that is not true righteousness because he has never measured himself against God's righteousness.
7. John Calvin describes this problem in the first chapter of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where he writes, "As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods. Suppose we but once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power — the straightedge to which we must be shaped. Then, what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness. What wonderfully impressed us under the name of wisdom will stink in its very foolishness. What wore the face of power will prove itself the most miserable weakness. That is, what in us seems perfection itself corresponds ill to the purity of God." [1.1.2]
8. The cure for self-righteousness is self-knowledge, and true self-knowledge only comes when we begin to have a true knowledge of God and his righteousness.

III. The Tax Collector: Trusting in God's Gracious Provision

- A. The second character in the parable is the tax collector.
 1. As was the case with the Pharisee, we need to make sure that we understand what Jesus's hearers would have been thinking when they heard him say that a tax collector went up to the temple to pray.

2. Of course, tax collectors are unpopular in all cultures, but they were especially hated in first century Israel.
 3. Rome subcontracted the task of tax collection to the highest bidder.
 4. Anything that could be collected beyond the amount that was bid could be pocketed by the tax collector.
 5. Given such an arrangement, it was not uncommon for tax collectors to be unscrupulous in carrying out their duties.
 6. Furthermore, this was a system that forced Jews to support a government that they did not want to have over them in the first place.
 7. Because of this, the Jews viewed tax collectors as traitors.
 8. They saw them as collaborating with Israel's oppressors.
- B. As we look at the brief prayer that the tax collector in Jesus's parable prayed when he went up to the temple, we see something that stands in sharp contrast to the prayer of the Pharisee.
1. The tax collector stood off at a distance, looked down at the ground, beat his breast, and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"
 2. Notice that he begins by addressing God.
 3. While the Pharisee also addressed God at the beginning of his prayer, he was blind to God's righteousness.
 4. But the tax collector clearly has a sense of God's greatness and majesty.
 5. He does not view himself in comparison to other people but in comparison to God.
 6. This is why he refers to himself as a "sinner."

7. When he evaluates himself in light of God's righteousness, he knows that he has nothing to present to God that would make God accept him.
- C. Because the tax collector has a true knowledge of God and of himself, he pleads with God to be merciful to him.
1. The Greek verb that is translated as "be merciful" essentially means to atone for sin by means of a blood sacrifice.
 2. There are other passages in the New Testament where this verb is translated as "make propitiation."
 3. This tells us that the tax collector is not asking God to overlook his sin but to make atonement for it.
 4. God never overlooks sin.
 5. He is a God of perfect justice.
 6. He will never clear the guilty.
 7. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ he has provided an atonement for sins.
 8. This is why we need to place our trust in Christ alone when it comes to our standing with God.
 9. If we put our trust in our performance, as the Pharisee did, we will stand condemned before God.
 10. But if we put our trust in God's gracious provision, we stand justified before God.
- D. The tax collector went to God as one who was stripped of all confidence in himself.
1. He was reduced to nothing and brought to the end of his resources.

2. Unlike the Pharisee, who thought that he was too good to need salvation, the tax collector saw his desperate need for forgiveness.
3. He certainly did not deserve God's forgiveness, but he was in the condition that is necessary in order to receive forgiveness.
4. He went home justified not because righteousness was infused in him, but because righteousness was imputed to him through faith in God's gracious provision for cleansing.

IV. Conclusion

- A. Near the end of John Bunyan's great allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful have a conversation with a man named Ignorance about the nature of saving faith.
 1. Here is how Ignorance responds to Christian's query, "what do you believe?": "I believe that Christ died for sinners and that I shall be justified before God from the curse through His gracious acceptance of my obedience to His law. I believe that Christ makes my religious duties acceptable to His Father, by virtue of His merits, and so shall I be justified."
 2. Now, what are we to make of this profession of faith?
 3. Well, Ignorance does speak of Christ's death for sinners and of Christ's merits, and he does make a reference to God's grace.
 4. But he also says that he will be justified because of God's gracious acceptance of his obedience to the law.
 5. In other words, he places his trust in his performance rather than in God's provision.
 6. This is not saving faith.
 7. Christian makes this clear in his response to Ignorance, where he says, your "faith is deceitful and will leave you under God's wrath in the Day of Judgment. True justifying faith makes the soul aware

of its lost condition under the Law. The soul that comes to the righteousness of Christ for refuge understands that it is Christ's righteousness alone that is acceptable to God. It is not a mixture of both Christ's obedience and our attempts at obedience that justify us to God. Your obedience is worthless and full of sin, and it is only the obedience of Jesus Christ that God accepts as payment for your sin. True faith causes the soul to flee underneath the righteousness of Christ for relief from the condemnation that we deserve, and it is Christ's righteousness alone that will be presented as spotless before God and accepted by Him as payment for our debt of sin." [Lovik, ed., 203-204]

- B. It is absolutely critical for us to understand this.
1. The mere fact that a person speaks of God's grace does not necessarily mean that that person has true saving faith.
 2. If grace is conceived as God's willingness to accept our best efforts at performing what he requires in the law, then grace is not understood in the sense that it is set forth in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 3. Grace is not something that God bestows to supplement our efforts.
 4. Grace is God bestowing goodness upon those who deserve nothing but severity and wrath, and this bestowal is only made possible because of the mediation of Christ on our behalf.
 5. This is why we have to place all of our trust in Christ alone for our salvation.
 6. As Martin Luther memorably expressed it, "It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ." [Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 18]
 7. This is exactly what we see the tax collector doing in this parable, and Jesus tells us that this man went down to his house justified.

8. For this reason, you can have full confidence that if you too despair of your own ability and cast yourself upon Christ for mercy, you too are justified before God.