

Going Home Justified

Jesus has a wonderful way of turning our expectations on their heads! I want you to think of two words this morning: arrogance and humility. **Arrogance** is an attitude of superiority – thinking you are better than others. Some synonyms for an arrogant person might be “self-importance,” “haughty,” “pretentious.” **Humility** is the opposite of arrogance. It is a recognition that you are NOT better than others. Someone who is humble might also be called “down-to-earth,” “reserved,” “deferential.”

Now, I want you to think of two people: an IRS agent standing at your door and a Sunday School teacher who has volunteered to instruct your children. Which of the two words (arrogance or humility) would you use to best describe the IRS agent? The Sunday School teacher? To tell His story, Jesus uses the two polar opposite professions in the first century Jewish communities: the most pious and respected, the beloved Pharisees and the most hated and despised, the turn-coat, thug-like tax collectors (v. 10) – He does this to shock his audience into hearing Him. Further, of the two people standing here in the temple, the tax-collector is clearly out of place. Of these two men, the last place you would expect the tax-collector, especially in Israel's current social and political climate, was at the temple praying to God. But here they both are!

The way Luke sets up Jesus' telling of the parable is important. He tells us that Jesus told the parable to (1) “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous AND (2) treated others with contempt” (v. 1). You're going to want to note carefully this morning that these two characteristics are intimately intertwined. People who are self-righteous will also show contempt (look down upon) for others and folks who usually look down on others also tend to think they are better than others. This is especially true when the stakes are really high, as in our relationship to God Almighty. We'll flesh this out a bit more in just a minute but first let's consider how both of these men approach God in prayer. That will tell us a lot about their condition before God. One thing is clear, one of them goes home justified by God while the other remains in a state of condemnation before God (v. 14a). So Jesus' parable serves as a wonderful barometer – a benchmark – for you to see where YOU stand before God this morning.

A question that might help us get at what is going on in the hearts of these two men in the parable is: **why do they go up to the temple?** It is not enough to answer **they go up to pray**. We need to answer the deeper question of what **they are both seeking** in going up to the temple to pray. After we read the story of each of the two men, we have to wonder, if the Pharisee thought what he thought about himself why did he go up to the temple to pray? What motivated his going up? As an extension of that question, we might ask you why you go to church? Why did you come to church this morning?

In a moment we will ask the same question about the tax-collector – why does he go up to the temple to pray? But for now, notice that they both go up to the temple and both go up to pray. That means

they are both standing in the same general vicinity in the house of God. The Pharisee, who is more sure of his standing before God, seems to be closer to the inner court, while the tax-collector stands off at a distance, probably out in the court of the Gentiles. Either way, they both show up at the temple together on this day and yet only one of them goes home justified before God while the other does not (v. 14). So it is not merely the fact that both are in the temple nor that one is closer to the inner sanctum of the temple than the other that determines their standing before God, i.e., whether they are in a right relationship to God or not.

The same is true of all of you this morning. The fact that you are at church, sitting here this morning is **not** enough of an indicator to determine your standing before God. In fact, we can assume that just as there were two kinds of people at the temple in Jesus' parable that there is likely both kinds of people here this morning. There are both types: those who are accepted by God and those who are rejected by God. Both of you have come to church this morning to pray and yet each of you have come for very different reasons and with very different attitudes in your heart towards God and others. In reality each of you have come with very different views of God and of yourselves before God. And its not because of how YOU view God and others that determines whether or not you are right with God, but it will give you a good idea of what condition your soul is before God. Like the Pharisee and the tax-collector praying in the temple together, only one group of you will go home today justified before God, while the other group will seek to stand before God with your heart hardened in your pride and self-sufficiency, condemned to an eternity in Hell.

Jesus begins His parable with two very different men, who come up to the temple to pray for two very different reasons (v. 10). The first man was a Pharisee. Now that was not necessarily a bad thing in-and-of-itself. The Pharisees were theologically conservative – they generally believed the Law and Prophets and attempted to rigorously follow their Jewish traditions. Most of the people looked up to the Pharisees, sometimes as if they were a standard perhaps too high for them to equal, but nevertheless seeing them as examples of piously following God. Your everyday Jew would have typically admired the faithfulness of the Pharisees' devotion to the things of God. That's why when Jesus used the Pharisee in His parable as an example of something negative it would have unsettled His audience, who would have normally been favorable towards the Pharisees.

This particular Pharisee had let his faithfulness to God go to his head. He is Jesus' example of someone “who trusted in himself that he was righteous AND who looked down on others who were not as faithful as he was to God” (v. 9). He stood “by himself” as if to say he was in a category all to himself and so trusted in his own righteousness that he didn't need anyone else to come to his aid. He was a self-made man. He achieved all he got. He was proud of all he accomplished in life and didn't need anyone else's help, or at least in his arrogance he didn't want to admit that he needed anyone else.

Now, it was certainly typical of Jewish prayers to begin them with a thanksgiving to God, usually for something God has done – this Pharisee surely did that. He began his prayer, “God, I thank you that . . . (v. 11). But from that point on it all went downhill from there. He may have even thought

that what he said next was something God did in him, but that's not quite the sense we get as we read on. He thanks God that "he is not like other men." Now, this is not a "there but by the grace of God go I" kind of statement. He shows his contempt for these other men. What kinds of men? Well, of course he is going to choose examples of the worst possible men: extortioners or thieves, unjust or unrighteous, adulterers or immoral, or even like this tax-collector (v. 11), all certainly unrighteous violators of the Law of God (cf. 1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:9-10). The final example the Pharisee gives shows that he is clearly generalizing about this particular man based simply on his vocation. Because he is a tax-collector he is automatically guilty; he is immoral before God. But it is not enough that he feels contempt for these sorts of people.

He also feels pretty good about himself. After all look at all the good he has done (v. 12). He may not be lifting a finger to help others but at least he fasts twice a week (cf. Matt. 23:4-5). This was way more than what God required. When one fasted he or she only took in bread and water and God required his people to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. So clearly he is going way above the call of duty, thinking this must surely impress God, as well as others. In fact, Jesus points out in another place how the Pharisees weren't content with keeping their piety between them and God but were certain to publicize their good works before others – to be noticed and praised by men. Jesus exhorted His disciples to not be like that:

¹⁶ "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6:16-18).

Jesus had the same thing to say about how the Pharisees gave so that others would notice them (cf. Matt. 6:1-4). They were "known" to have paid their tithes on everything they received down to the food they ate and even the herbs they used to season their food (v. 12; cf. Matt. 23:23; Lk. 11:42). Again, they were known by others to go above and beyond the call of duty. And it was on the basis of these kinds of acts that the Pharisees acknowledged their superiority over most others. It is because he has gone beyond all that was asked of him that God should be impressed with his stellar achievements!

Think of what the Pharisee is saying and before Whom he is saying it. At one time or another, you may not be so brash as to say these kinds of things to God, but some of you have said, "I am glad I'm not like other people . . ." At least, I'm straight . . . they're gay. I work hard for what I got. I made something of myself. They made a mess of their life, they deserve what they got. Why should I lift a finger to help them? I chose to follow Jesus . . . they didn't. They should have to suffer for being a pagan. I'm a better father or mother than they are . . . that is why their children aren't walking with God anymore. These are things I have actually heard some of you say about others. They all reflect the same attitude of the Pharisee who "trusts in himself that he is righteous and treats others with contempt" (v. 9).

It shouldn't only shock you this morning to hear the things you have said about others read back to you. What really ought to shock is to know before Whom you have said those things! Think of again of what the Pharisee is doing – He is thanking God that He is better than others. Now, does He really think that God is impressed with his skills of tithing and fasting? Do you really think God is impressed that you are straight or that you are a better parent or wife than others? When you compare yourself to Jesus – not someone else in the same condition you are in – but Jesus – do you really think God is going to look at Jesus and then look at you and be impressed by anything you have done? Are you really that foolish? Are you really that blind?

And notice what the Pharisee does. He doesn't pick on someone who is morally superior to himself. No. He picks the worse possible examples of humanity and then prides himself that he is not as bad as those people. He doesn't compare himself to someone who fast three times a week or tithes everything he gets. He doesn't recognize his own failures as a sinner because there is always someone worse than we are. So, why is he doing this? What moves him to think of others this way?

It all goes back to what he thinks about God. The way you think about God will affect everything you do, including how you treat others.

The Pharisee sees his relationship with God as one of being in competition with others for God's favor. If God is going to accept the Pharisee, he must be acceptable before God. Paul points this out to the Romans:

² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.
³ For not knowing about God's righteousness and **seeking to establish their own**, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God . . . ⁵ For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. (**Rom. 10:2-5**).

This is exactly how Jesus describes them here in **v. 9** – they trusted in themselves that they were righteous. NOW, there is only one way that you could possibly think for one moment that you are righteous. And that is by seeing others as unrighteous! Either you will look at the worst possible examples of humanity or you will find a flaw, any flaw will do, in your neighbor. Once you can point that out, you instantly will feel better about your chances of gaining God's favor.

The only problem is what to do if you find someone else who doesn't have a flaw and makes you look really bad before God. After all, that's what happened to Cain and Abel. As long as Abel was around, Cain had no chance of gaining God's favor. So he killed him. And the “Cains” of this world did it again when God Himself showed up and because they knew they were never going to gain God's favor as long as Jesus hung around, they decided to instead hang him on a tree to die! With Him out of the way, they could get on with “seeking to establish their own” righteousness based on the law. With Jesus out of the way, maybe, they think, they now have a fighting chance! This is how we treat one another as long as we are trying to gain favor with God by the works of the law. Paul

describes it as:

But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.
(Gal. 5:15).

It is clear that the attitude of the Pharisees doesn't impress Jesus in the slightest. You can show Him all your trophies and good works you have accumulated throughout life and to the One who eyes are too holy to behold sin, all your righteousness is filthy rags (cf. Isa. 64:6). And that's exactly how the tax-collector understood himself before God (v. 13).

He is the complete opposite of the Pharisee. He went up to the temple, not to impress God, but to cry – to cry out to Him for mercy. He stood “far off” from God and would not dare lift his eyes to the LORD. He knew he was too impure to look upon God's glory and live. Instead of proudly lifting his breast in haughtiness before God, he pounded upon it with his fists revealing his sense of unworthiness before God. There is no self-confidence or pretension in his voice. He's been arrested by God and he knows it is time to come clean and admit his moral bankruptcy before God's holiness. There is no presumption of merit before God. He knows God owes him nothing but death. He is a sinner and the wages of sin is death (cf. Rom. 6:23). His only hope is that God will choose to show Him mercy. As a sinner, he knows “the ball” is in God's court. It is up to Him alone to decide what He is going to do with this sinner who has no claims on God.

Do you see the difference between these two men? Can you tell how vastly different is their approach to God? Which one do you think pleases God? Which one do you think God will accept into His presence?

And yet some of you this morning will hear everything Jesus has to say to you and yet like the Pharisee you will return home today with the same hard-heart towards God and you will continue to show the same contempt to others who are not as good as you are. You will continue to wonder why others can't try harder and get their life right like you have been able to do. And there will be no question in your heart that God must be thankful – He surely is impressed – to have you in His kingdom. It's just too bad He has to go and fill it up with all these other people who are so unworthy of being here.

If that's you this morning, let me ask you a very simple question: which of the two do you think is more likely to go out from the temple and serve their neighbor in love? Do you think its going to be the Pharisee who thinks he is better than others and holds them in contempt? Or do you think its going to be the sinner who knows he is saved only by God's mercy?

There is no question that God delights in seeing His loving service to helpless sinners imitated in His children. It makes God happy to see us love one another and help one another through life. If you have done everything right in life and you made something special of your life, then fine . . . use what you have achieved to help those who have made an awful mess of their lives.

And stop worrying about whether or not the other people God has put in the path of your life are worth helping or not. Let's be clear about this and I know some of you will not like hearing this but God did not help you – He did not give you life – because you were worth it. He gave you life because He is love and it glorifies Him to “make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory” (**Rom. 9:23**). The prophet Micah has beautifully summed up the kind of life that makes God happy:

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (**Mic. 6:8**).

It's the kind of life that you can know for sure that will always please God to see in you. You don't ever have to wonder if what you are doing is right or wrong when you choose to humble yourself before God and serve others in love. But you do know with certainty that the life that God hates – that He opposes – is the life of the proud who shows contempt for his fellow man:

You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. ⁶ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷ casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. (**1 Pet. 5:5-7**).

Jesus ends His parable with this teaching. The tax-collector who understood that the only reason he will receive anything good from God is because of God's mercy. God owes him nothing but death and condemnation. And it is this attitude and only this attitude toward God that will ever receive anything good from God. Because, as Jesus explains, “everyone who exalts himself before God, God will humble” but the one who “humbles himself before God, God will exalt him” (**v. 14**).

And just in case you think this morning, “Who is God to speak to me like this? Who does He think He is to require me to humble myself before Him?”

He is the eternal God:

who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (**Phil. 2:6-8**). And it was for this reason that: God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (**Phil. 2:9-11**).

Amen! -SDG-