

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

Luke 18:9-14

With great simplicity and directness Christ spoke this parable to self-satisfied people who trusted in themselves as being righteous, and who consequently looked down on others. It is just as applicable today as it was when it was spoken.

Christ said, "Two men went up into the temple to pray." I like that statement. People go to the house of the Lord for various reasons, but a major one should be to pray. Christ said, "My house shall be called the house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13).

In imagination go with me to this temple of worship in the days of our Lord. Let us drop in behind these two men whom Christ described and watch them closely, in order that we may find the flaws in our own attitudes and practices. These men certainly furnish us a clinic for our spiritual self-examination. One of the men was a prominent and outstanding citizen, well-known and highly respected. The other was an outcast, with no standing in the community. In these men we find numerous virtues and flaws in glaring contrast. We shall note three sharp contrasts between them.

I. A Contrast In Character.

1. The Pharisee.

In spite of his glaring defects, the Pharisee had certain commendable qualities which should make some who criticize him ashamed of themselves.

(1) He was a devoutly religious man.

It was to the credit of the Pharisee that he went to the temple to pray. A man cannot be what he ought to be who does not avail himself of the opportunity to go to the house of God. By his attendance upon the services there he publicly proclaims his faith in those forces which are the molders of character and the very safeguards of civilization.

(2) He was a clean moral man.

He did not wallow in the filth of uncleanness. No scandal was attached to his name. He was clean in his personal habits. His moral conduct was all that could be desired. Of his morality he said, "I am not an adulterer." We should credit him with the high morality which he claimed for himself because our Lord did not dispute it. Some who criticize him cannot truthfully say as much for themselves in this regard. Personal purity is a good thing, even though it does not save.

(3) He was an honest business man.

The Pharisee was fair and just in his business dealings. He did not seek to possess the property of any man either by fraud or by force. He was not a swindler, cheating those with whom he did business. He was not like some people whom I have known who have unfortunate people to work for them and pay them only a fraction of what their labor is worth, and then call that charity. He did

not take advantage of anybody by charging exorbitant prices, and then call that good business when God calls it stealing. He was honest in his dealings with others.

- (4) He was a very generous man.
Not only did the Pharisee go to the house of God, but he took his tithes with him. In recognition of God's ownership of him and all his possessions, and being an honest man, he took the tithe of his entire income, and not just a tenth of what remained after all of his personal expenses had been deducted. He said, "I give tithes of all that I possess." That was commendable in him, or in anyone else, because the Bible says, "The tithe is the Lord's" (Leviticus 27:30). In paying the tithe of all that he made, he was simply doing his duty and proving his honesty. How many of you can truthfully say, "I bring a tenth of my income to the Lord's house and place it in His treasury"?
- (5) He was quite proud of himself.
The Pharisee considered himself to be as good as anybody he knew. He did not see any flaws in himself. He did not regard himself as a sinner. In his own estimation he was the best man to be found. The Pharisee gave himself credit for a decided superiority over others. He was convinced that if only others were as himself the world's problems would be solved. From this point of view, there is a potential Pharisee, if not an actual one, within us all. We often think that we are distinctly superior to those who are not as we are. But Christ would have us keenly aware of the heights yet to be reached.

2. The Publican.

- (1) He was not deeply religious.
- (2) He was dishonest.
A man could not have been honest and continued in the business in which he was engaged. Extortion and crookedness of various sorts were necessary to make the business of a publican pay. The work of a publican was considered the basest of all means of earning a livelihood.
- (3) He was stingy.
Since money was his god, this miserable skinflint sacrificed his all upon the altar of greed. He allowed himself to become a contemptible cat's-paw in the hands of the Roman government in order to satisfy the master passion of his life, which was the getting of money. He got all of the money that he could from the taxpayers and kept as much of it as possible.
- (4) He was regarded as social riff-raff.
The publican was looked upon as a traitor to his nation. Having a tarnished reputation, he was not invited to enter the social circles. He was considered a liability to the community.
- (5) He was conscious of his sins.
The publican was fully aware that he had many faults and sins. He considered himself as the pre-eminent sinner.

II. A Contrast In Conduct.

These two men, whose characters we have just contrasted, met at the house of prayer. Their conduct there in the act of prayer opened the windows which permit us to look into their very souls.

1. The Pharisee.

- (1) He did not approach God correctly.
Very abruptly he said, "God, I thank thee." That sounds far more like the language of a person to his equal than of a creature to his Maker.
- (2) He gave himself credit for superiority over others.
The Pharisee boasted about what he did not do. "I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican." Thus he declared that he was neither a robber, nor a rogue, nor a rake. After all, how much does that say for a person? Who wants to live next door to somebody of whom nothing better can be said than that he will not harm your person, your property or your family? While pretending to thank God for his own moral excellencies, this self-righteous, self-centered and self-satisfied Pharisee actually recited his own virtues and boasted of his own good deeds. He was so conceited and arrogant that he was not conscious of having received anything, but only of something achieved by himself. He was highly inflated with a sense of his personal importance. He congratulated himself on being free of the common faults of men.
- (3) He confessed the sins of others only.
In his self-examination the Pharisee found nothing except what he considered to be meritorious and deserving of the approbation of God. Having no fault to find with himself, he did not have anything good to say about others. It is always true that the person who thinks highly of himself thinks less of others.

Like many people today, the Pharisee made the mistake of comparing his life with the lives of disreputable people, and then took to himself the credit of exalted superiority. Note with what frequency he flourished the big "I" when he compared himself with others. He said, "I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican." Surely arrogance and pride could not have gone beyond that. Very few things are more disgusting than the self-satisfied person who tries to exalt himself by speaking disparagingly about other people. One may look good to himself, especially when he compares himself with those who are not what they ought to be, but God does not measure us by that standard.

If you would come to an accurate estimate of your character, look at those who are better than you, and compare yourself with them; look at those whom God has set as examples for us and measure yourself by them. If you will do this, your Pharisaic trust and pride in your own goodness will melt away like frost before the sun.

- (4) He did not have any consciousness of need.
Lacking the consciousness of the divine presence, the Pharisee did not have any awareness of sin. He was self-righteousness personified. He thought that he was well able to get along without God. While he was satisfied with himself, God was far from being pleased

with him. Men fail to realize that the important facet in religion is not how one looks to himself, or even how he looks to others, but rather how he looks to God. The Pharisee really needed a mirror in which to see himself as God saw him, and that is our need also.

2. The Publican.

(1) He was convicted of his sins.

The publican realized that he was a sinner. A consciousness of guilt burned within his soul. A conviction had been wrought within him that all was not right between him and God. He knew that the wrath of God which rested upon him was just and right. Overwhelmed with the vileness of his own heart, he did not consider himself worthy to approach God. Because conviction of sin had laid hold upon him and struck its arrow to the depths of his soul, he felt like an intruder when he ventured into the house of prayer. For that reason, as well as to avoid being observed, he stood just outside the entrance.

(2) He penitently confessed his sinfulness.

His sin rose to vast proportions before his eyes and he realized that God was highly displeased with him, and rightly so. Knowing that he deserved condemnation, the publican did not offer a single excuse for his sins. He did not blame his parents, his wife, his children, his associates or his environment for his sins. He did not compare himself with anybody. He did not say anything about other people in his prayer. He was the only sinner about whom he was thinking or for whom he was praying. He did not remind God of any good thing he had done. He was so ashamed of his sins that he did not so much as lift his eyes toward heaven. True repentance took all daring out of him, and as he stood there with bowed head his confession of sin came forth from his lips like water gushing from an irrepressible spring.

(3) He earnestly begged for mercy.

With an utter abhorrence of himself for his sinful ways and a strong hatred of his sins, he kept smiting his breast in vehement self-reproach, anguish and self-judgment, he pleaded for mercy saying, "God be merciful to me the sinner." Pounding the breast was a sign of soul anguish and a common way of expressing grief. How concise, direct and appropriate, and yet how comprehensive and sufficient, was his plea for the mercy of pardon and peace!

III. A Contrast In Condition.

When the services were over the Pharisee and the publican left to return to their respective homes. What was the condition of each as they went away from the temple?

1. The Pharisee.

(1) He had not asked for anything.

(2) He had not received anything.

The Pharisee went away without the touch of God upon his spirit. He was so full of self that he did not have any room in his heart for the Lord. He went away unhelped and unblessed.

- (3) He went away worse than when he came.
Any self-satisfied person is a pathetic figure. One who is as good as he wants to be will not get any better.
- (4) He went to hell.
Why did the Pharisee go to hell? Because he refused to acknowledge that he was a sinner, and enumerated his virtues instead. He went to hell because he trusted in his own good qualities and works instead of trusting in Christ as his Saviour.

2. The publican.

- (1) He had asked for mercy.
- (2) He had received forgiveness of sin.
- (3) He had received justification.
Christ said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified."
- (4) He went to heaven.

The door of hell is open to anyone who does what the Pharisee did, namely, trusts in his deeds to save him. The door of heaven is open to anyone who does what the publican did, namely, trusts in the Lord to save him. Whatever you possess you got in one of three ways. Either you earned it by your own efforts, or you stole it, or someone gave it to you. You cannot earn salvation, for salvation is not by works. Works are the result or fruit of salvation, but works do not obtain it. It is a certainty that you cannot steal salvation. There is only one way you can obtain salvation, and that is for Someone to give it to you. So the Bible says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10).