

RELIGIOUSLY GOING TO HELL

Luke 18: 9-14

This is always a popular parable with people who do not go to church, because they think it entirely justifies them in their course of action. They interpret the Pharisee to mean the person who is strict in religious observances, who is found in his place Sunday after Sunday, who limits his giving to systematic principles, and who disciplines his life by acts of self-denial; while the role of the publican they assign to themselves though it may be questioned how far they play the part with real heart-rendering repentance which is the cause of his going down to his house justified rather than the other.

However, this is not the meaning of the parable. It is aimed at the sort of spirit which trusts in itself. The purpose of the parable is summed up in the words: "Jesus spake this parable to certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others."

This parable is one of the most scathing that Jesus ever uttered. It was addressed to certain self-satisfied souls who trust in themselves as being righteous, and who, as the outcome of this trust, looked down on others. The picture in the parable is, of course, a cartoon; but like all good cartoons, the emphasis is on actuality. It appears that by this parable Jesus aimed to: —

1. Prove that self-righteousness is possible.
2. Prove that self-righteousness grows from the root of self-deception.
3. Prove that self-righteousness and contempt for others are closely allied.
4. Condemn groundless contempt and bad opinions of others.
5. Expose and reprove that part of self-love which makes one proud of his own righteousness.
6. Rebuke and subdue the spirit of self-righteousness.
7. Recommend repentance and humility towards God as the first step to amendment.
8. Revive the spirit of the contrite and embolden them to hope in God's mercy.
9. Caution against pride, formality in religion, and resting in anything short of the atoning blood of Christ.

In imagination go with me on a journey to a temple of worship in the days of our Lord. Let us drop in behind two worshippers and watch them closely, thereby seeking to find flaws in our own attitudes and practices. These two men furnish a spiritual clinic for self-examination. They are designated as, "One a Pharisee, the other a publican." A comparison in the speech of our day would be, "One a church man, and the other an outbroken sinner unidentified with the church, but suddenly moved upon to seek God." In both of these characters we find numerous virtues and flaws in glaring contrast. Mechanical and spiritual religion were never set in contrast more forcefully than by our Lord in the lesson of this hour. This story presents three sharp contrasts between the two men. The contrasts are between:—

I. Their Characters

1. The Pharisee

He climbs the steps of the church as if the whole institution were his. But in spite of his glaring defects, he has certain good qualities that ought to make some of who criticize him ashamed.

(1) He is devoutly religious man.

He belongs to the church and gives it his hearty support. By so doing, he is publicly proclaiming his faith in those forces that

are molders of character and the very safeguards of civilization. He attends the services of the temple. He supports the institutional worship. He gives the tenth. It is the custom among the more devout to fast twice per week. He is punctilious in this observance.

(2) He is a clean moral man.

Of his personal habits he can truthfully say, "I am not an adulterer. I am clean morally." Many who would criticize him cannot say it.

(3) He is an honest business man.

He is rigidly square and honest in his business relations. He is of unquestioned integrity. He can truthfully say, "I am not an extortioner." He is not a money grabber, cheating those with whom he does business. He is not like some who need some work done and when they find somebody almost starving get them to do a dollars worth of work for twenty-five or fifty cents and then call it charity. He does not take advantage of one's ignorance and charge two prices and call it good business when God calls it stealing. He is straight with his fellowman and the government.

(4) He is a highly respected citizen.

As a Pharisee he belongs to the best society, and being well thought of and spoken of, he has a very desirable rating in the community. Seemingly, he is a real asset to the community.

(5) He is a very generous man.

He gives tithes of all that he possesses. He supports the institutional worship. He favors and supports institutions for the protection and improvement of society. The poor never cry unto him in pain.

(6) He is quite proud of himself.

He is above the average in his community and is as good as any he knows. He sees no flaws in himself, and is the best man to be found, according to his own estimation. His high opinion of himself is shown by his statement, "I thank thee that I am not as the rest of men."

2. The Publican

(1) He is not a deeply religious man.

(2) He is a dishonest man.

He cannot be honest and continue in his business for extortion and crookedness are necessary to make the business of publican pay. It is the basest of all livelihoods.

(3) He is a stingy man.

He is a miserable old skinflint. Money is his god and upon the altar of greed he sacrifices his all. He allows himself to become a contemptible cat's-paw in order to satisfy the master passion of his life, which is getting of money. He gets all the money he can and cans all of it he gets.

(4) He is looked down on by his fellow-men.

He is regarded as a social riff-raff. He is not classed among the so-called better people. He never enters exclusive social circles. He is considered a liability to the community.

(5) He is conscious of his sins.

In his own eyes he is the one preeminent sinner--the chief of sinners.

II. Their Conduct At Church

Drawn by a universal instinct to pray, these two men whom we have just contrasted meet at church or in the temple. The prayers of these men fling wide open the windows that look into their very souls. Let us listen to: ---

1. The Pharisee's Prayer

Notice with what preminence and frequency he flourishes the big "I". He says, "God, I thank thee, that I are not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all that I possess." What a prayer! These words simply tell us what kind of a man he is. They tell us:--

(1) He has a good eye on himself.

He begins his prayer by enumerating his virtues. He deems himself qualified to pray because of these virtues. He thinks of God as being as satisfied with external conduct and not as requiring purity and humility of heart. In his enumeration of his virtues he fails to see his shortcomings. Consequently he confesses only the sins of others. In his own mind he has superior religious merit. He is proud of himself and trusts in himself. He is saturated with the spirit of self-sufficiency. He is an ideal perfectionist, claiming sinless perfection.

(2) He has a bad eye on others.

Having no fault to find with himself, he has nothing good to say for others. It seems to be a rule that the better we think of ourselves, the worse we think of others. He makes the mistake of comparing his life with the life of disreputable people and so taking to himself the credit of exalted superiority. He should look in the other direction. If you would come to a just estimate of your character, look at those better than you, and compare yourself with them; look at those whom God has set for our examples and measure yourself by them and this Pharisaic trust and pride in your own goodness will melt away like frost before the sun.

(3) He has no eye on God.

He begins his prayer by using the word, GOD, but we can be perfectly sure that he has no sense of the Divine presence. We can be sure for this reason, he has no sense of sin. Wherever and whenever any soul gets a vision of God, there follows always a sense of sin. Where there is no sense of sin, we may be perfectly sure that there is no sense of God.

Very few people are silly enough to think that they are as good as they might be, but many, looking around and comparing themselves with others, do not compare favorably to themselves. They say, "Doubtless, I am not as good as I might be, but I am better than so and so."

2. The Publican's Prayer.

How different is the prayer of the publican who has been driven to this place of prayer by his sense of need. He claims no superiority. His only uniqueness is that his need is more desperate than that of his fellows. He has no virtues to boast about. Feeling his sinfulness and helplessness, he goes straight to God with full confession of his sins and appeals for mercy only. He says, "God be merciful to me THE sinner." His prayer is a confession of sin. He has not only done wrong, but he is wrong.

(1) He is sensible of the holiness of God.

(2) He is fully conscious of his own sinfulness.

He sees himself unworthy, undone, and utterly helpless.

(3) He publicly confesses himself a sinner.

(4) He humbly but very earnestly begs for mercy.

They differ greatly in the spirit in which they approach the throne of God. The Pharisee approaches it in the spirit of self-satisfaction. It is less a prayer in which he gave thanks to God than a congratulatory in which he addressed himself. The publican's prayer reveals a spirit of deep humility and self-abasement. The prayer of self-exultation evoked the Divine displeasure, whereas, the prayer of humility evoked the Divine favor. One came parading his virtue and uttered ignoring God, while the other came pleading his need and supplicating God.

III. Their Conditions Upon Leaving Church

And now the service is over and the worshippers are on their way home. What has it done for these two men whose prayers we have just heard?

1. The Pharisee

(1) He has received nothing.

He has gone away without the touch of God upon his spirit.

He has gone away unhelped and unblessed.

He has no room for Christ in his heart because it is too full of self.

(2) He has gone away worse than he came.

His self-satisfaction has made him a victim of arrested development.

The man who is as good as he desires to be will get no better. He is a pathetic figure, all the more so because he really believes that he is doing God's will.

(3) He had gone to hell.

Why? Because:--

a. He trusted in himself

b. He did not acknowledge himself to be a sinner

c. He did not cry to God for mercy. Instead, he told God how good he was.

2. The Publican

(1) He has been Pardoned.

(2) He has been cleansed.

(3) He has been regenerated.

(4) He has been given a new spirit

(5) He has gone to heaven.

Why? Because:--

a. He has taken his rightful place as a sinner before God.

b. He has asked God for mercy.

c. He has recognized that there is no mercy except on the ground of the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

The door of heaven is open to anyone who will do what the publican did.