Parable 6

**The Pharisee and the tax collector Luke 18:9 to 14**

When you come to a parable you can often find the reason Jesus taught it at the start of the passage. Jesus never told a story for the sake of it – he always addressed an issue that had been raised by a group or individual. On this occasion he was faced with ‘some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else’ (v9).

The basic issue running through this chapter is humility. The tax collector is contrasted to the Pharisee in verses 9 to 14; the picture of childlike faith is commended in v 15 to 17 and the rich young ruler’s exchange with Jesus is in verses 18 to 30.

1. All of these narratives emphasise the kind of people Jesus wants us to be.

What does it mean to be ‘confident of our own righteousness’? Could it be that we get to a place where we think we have done enough to keep God happy?

Are we ever guilty of ‘looking down on other people’?

The tax collector/Pharisee story focusses on the type of people that God blesses. (Compare 5:27 to 32 and 7:29 to 30). What commends a person to God does not include qualities like self-sufficiency or social status. In 1st century Palestine Pharisees were regarded as the solid bastion of Jewish history and culture. Tax collectors were seen as Roman servants who extracted money from an unwillingly occupied people.

1. Do we ever fall into the trap of holding the wrong people in high esteem?

Is the holding of position of senior authority a guarantee of godly living - clearly not so, so how do we deal with people of high office who lack moral integrity? Should they be respected, questioned or ignored?

Do we ever ignore or belittle people who we consider to be of a lower level to ourselves?

What do you mean by a ‘Godly person’?

This parable is really the parable of two prayers. In those prayers appear two kinds of hearts whose contrast is not only seen in the way they make their request, but also in the way they approach God. The Pharisee approaches God boldly and begins with what looks like a ‘Praise Psalm’ - in that context the writer would thank GOD for something he has done. But the Pharisee is grateful for himself - for the fact he is not like other sinners. He even lists the people he regards as inferior human beings including the man he is standing next to in prayer.

1. We may think we would never do such a thing but have we observed or been part of a scenario where one believer is not considered to be of equal value?

What kind of values mean we can consider ourselves as superior?

The Pharisee tells God some of the things he has done for him. Both are good things to do (fasting and tithing) but they should be expressions of a grateful heart not a reason for boasting.

1. Are we allowed to be proud of the things we have done for God?

Should we ever tell other people the things we have done?

Is it up to others to acknowledge our acts of service?

The Pharisees fast was above and beyond the call of duty so he was saying he was doing even more than was demanded by the list of practices. But in contrast the tax-collector does not stand up but approaches God with a sense of distance. He does not look up to heaven (a sign of contrition) but beats his breast, fully aware that he approaches God as a sinner. There is no self-congratulation. There is no summary of his good deeds. There is no sense that God ought to feel honoured or obligated to the tax-collector. His simple plea is for God to have mercy on him.

1. What does it mean when we ask God for mercy?

Mercy implies that God is angry with sin and we need him to not deal with us as we deserve.

What does this say about the character of God?

How should the example of this collector change our approach to prayer?

Are we too orientated to lists in our prayers rather than acknowledging the awesome character of God?

Jesus’ comment closes the discussion. He endorses the tax-collectors approach – he is the one whose prayer is heard – not the. boastful Pharisee. The prayer God hears is the prayer for mercy. Bravado and appearance mean nothing. Social status doesn’t matter. Self-reliance implies we don’t need God’s mercy. What matters is a heart that appreciates what God can give.

The tax collector goes home knowing the full experience of God’s forgiveness.

1. Why not spend some time in prayer? Perhaps you can echo the prayer of the socially outcast tax-collector knowing that God will forgive all who humbly ask for his mercy.