

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

THE PARABLES OF JESUS – PART 9

October 25, 2026

Jesus told parables...

1. In order to help people understand what God's kingdom is like, how He rules, the way He loves those He calls.
2. To challenge us to see ourselves in the stories, to draw us into the narratives.

Because God the Father is a good storyteller...

1. He's writing a story into which your life ultimately fits, and...
2. It shouldn't surprise us that God the Son also uses stories to reach us, since...

Jesus is...

- "The exact likeness of the unseen God." (Colossians 1:15)
- "The image of God." (II Corinthians 4:4)
- "The radiance of God's glory and exact representation of his being." (Hebrews 1:3)

Jesus himself said as much to his disciples:

"Don't you know me ... even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9)

The whole universe – including us! – was made through Christ (Colossians 1:16), so it makes sense that Jesus understands how best to communicate his truth to us.

Recent research in neuroscience confirms that stories are far more effective than propositions (simple statements of fact) for conveying truth:

1. Stories offer significantly higher cognitive fluency, retention, and persuasion.
2. When receiving ideas in narrative form, our brains simulate the experience of the story.
3. Stories trigger emotional resonance, foster trust, and are easily locked into long-term memory.
4. Listeners are less inclined to counterargue when presented truth in story form.

A quick aside: The Evil One also knows perfectly well the power of narratives to influence people. Stories in any form can be very powerful for good or for ill.

“The creating and telling of stories could be as much a vehicle of truth as science or math or philosophy.”

Louis Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*

The imagination is “a truth-bearing faculty.”

Macolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil*

“We need to ... reclaim the significance of narrative forms of truth telling, not because propositions aren’t important, but because there are certain truths that are better and more compellingly told as a narrative, play, poem, or movie.”

Professor Rick Langer, Talbot School of Theology

Jesus chose parables – stories – because the truths he wishes to communicate are more compellingly told that way.

Luke 18:9-14:

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Consider the Tax Collector

- Jesus chooses the least likely person, the most despised character to be the “hero” of his story.
- It’s difficult for us to conceive of a modern-day equivalent to first century tax collectors in occupied Israel.
- Tax collectors seemed to have no place among God’s people, but Jesus repeatedly demonstrates that salvation is for all, and everyone can become a part of the Kingdom.
- What truth does this communicate? God isn’t interested in what we believe we bring to the table, what we think we have going for us that commends us to Him.

Consider the Pharisee

- His prayer isn’t really a prayer at all. Some Bible translations have the Pharisee praying not to God, but to himself!

- In their self-centered religiosity, the Pharisees neglected the things that really matter to God. (Matthew 23:23)
- According to Jesus, the Pharisee's attitude is exactly the opposite of that which is required to approach God: the attitude of a child.

What does it look like to approach God with the attitude of a child?

"With humility, total dependence, full trust, frank openness, and complete sincerity."

The NIV Study Bible

What can we learn from the postures of the two players in this parable?

1. We too are tempted to fall into the trap of the Pharisee.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast."

Ephesians 2:8-9

2. We make the mistake of thinking that, like practically every other good thing in life, God's favor must be earned.
3. Our understanding of God's grace is tremendously flawed.

Two Opposite and Equally Dangerous Lies:

1. "I don't measure up. Other Christians do it better than I do. I must be a disappointment to God."
2. "I'm really not that bad. Other people are way worse than I am."

The person who believes either is not "resting in the message of God's love." He or she has entirely misunderstood the message of the Gospel.

"Christ was sent not to mend wounded people or wake sleepy people or advise confused people or inspire bored people or spur on lazy people or educate ignorant people but to raise dead people."

Dane Ortlund, Gentle and Lowly

Jesus says that the tax collector is the one who is justified before God. This is the whole gospel in a single sentence:

1. Agree with God about your hopeless situation.
2. Understand you can't do anything to earn His approval.
3. Cry out for His mercy, and receive the free gift of His love.

The one who does this is the one God justifies, and this is all it takes.

Small Group Discussion Questions for the Week of October 25, 2026.

Opening

1. What good things that you've experienced or achieved in life have required a tremendous amount of hard work?
2. What good things that you've experienced or enjoyed in life required no work whatsoever on your part?

Digging Deeper into the Scriptures

1. Read Ephesians 2:8-9. As a group, define "grace" in the biblical sense. Then consider why it's so difficult for people to accept the idea of God's grace.
2. During the sermon we looked at two opposite and equally dangerous lies:
A. "I don't measure up. Other Christians do it better than I do. I must be a big disappointment to God." And B. "I'm really not that bad. Other people are way worse than I am."

To which are you more prone? Why do you think that is?

3. Read the entire parable in Luke 18:9-14. Review what Jesus means by saying that the tax collector is the one who is justified before God. What are the implications of this for us?

Reflecting on the Message

1. Do you confidently "rest in the message of God's love" for you? Is it your "day-by-day, moment-by-moment" experience? Why or why not?
2. Do you really consistently "live with an awareness" of God's longing for you? Is it something you understand in more than just a doctrinal sense? Why or why not?
3. Consider again how you responded to the second question in the above section, "Digging Deeper into the Scriptures." What does your answer to that question reveal about the way you're inclined to misunderstand God?