



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina  
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### An Accurate Assessment Luke 18:9-14

<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup> “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.’

<sup>14</sup> “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.”<sup>1</sup>

#### *A shocking story . . .*

Does this story kind of shock you? Does it throw you off balance a little?

I mean, look at the two characters, two men. They’re about as different as two men could be.

Here’s this *Pharisee* Jesus talks about. He belongs to the most devoted sect of the Jews of that day. He’s serious about studying and keeping the Law, the Torah. He spends hours each day studying it, and goes to great lengths to do what it prescribes. In fact, this particular Pharisee goes beyond what the Torah requires in at least two areas.

He not only fasted on the Day of Atonement as the Law required; like some others, he fasted twice a week! Likewise, the Torah required a tithe of certain agricultural products, but he gave tithes of all he got—which may even have included *what he bought*. He was both pious and particular.

And look at the way he prays. He assumes the proper physical posture: he’s standing, apparently in the usual way that Jews prayed, with their hands lifted as they looked toward heaven. And like the psalmists, he expresses his thanks to God, recognizing that his lot in life has come from God.

This man is a Pharisee’s Pharisee! He’s a model of morality, a paragon of piety!

And then there’s this *tax collector*. He’s everything his fellow Jews love to hate. He’s disloyal to his people, having sold out to the Romans, contracting with them to collect taxes and tributes from his fellow-Jews. He’s dishonest, collecting as much above what the people actually owe as he can, pocketing it as his finder’s fee or commission. He’s spiritually unclean as well as ceremonially unclean. Religiously, he’s in a hopeless situation. If he tries to make restitution, he

has to restore what he's taken, plus twenty percent. If he decides to stop collecting taxes, he loses his livelihood and will probably incur Roman wrath. He's a sad soul in a miserable situation. He's despised and dejected.

And he knows it. When he prays at the temple, he won't come up close to the front. And instead of lifting his hands and eyes to heaven, he won't even look up. He beats his chest as a sign of his mourning. And he pleads for God to be merciful to him.

And yet, Jesus tells us that after these two men pray, it's the *tax collector* that goes home justified—forgiven, set in a right relationship with God, delivered from his guilt and set free from his bondage—not the Pharisee.<sup>2</sup>

Does that shock you?

I'm sure it shocked those people to whom Jesus told this parable. Luke says that he told it **to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous . . .** (18:9, NKJV, NRSV). He was telling it to people who were trusting in themselves rather than God. And because they were trusting in themselves rather than God, they were looking down on other people, despising them when they compared them to themselves and their own success in keeping the Law. They were like that popular song from around 1980 that said: "Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way."

So Jesus tells this parable to them.

### ***A closer look . . .***

When you look closely at how the Pharisee prays in the story, you begin to see some problems.

To begin with, while he goes to the temple to pray, his prayer isn't so much a prayer as it is a monologue. The NIV (1984 edition) translates it that he **stood up and prayed about himself** (18:11). The Greek says quite literally that he **stood to himself and prayed these things . . .** The NASB goes so far as to translate it that he **stood and was praying this to himself . . .**

You get the picture, don't you? It's all about him! He's in his own world, focusing completely on himself and what he's like and what he's done. Any intention of this prayer is to congratulate himself and God on how good he is!

And look at how he does it! "**God, I thank you that I am not like other people**"—that's a little arrogant, isn't it? He goes on to spell it out: "**robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.**" Then he goes on to tell about how he not only keeps the Law, he goes beyond it with his fasting and tithing.

But in the meantime, this tax collector he looks down on and cites in his prayer, is over to the side, standing at a distance, and begins to pray a very different prayer. He knows he's not righteous. He knows he's not keeping the Law. He knows he's guilty. He knows he has nothing to offer to God.

So he stands there in shame. He doesn't lift his eyes to heaven, because he knows he's not worthy to. He doesn't lift his hands, because he knows that they are spiritually unclean. No, instead, he beats on his chest, an ancient sign of mourning, and he pleads, "**God, have mercy on me, a sinner!**"

When the Pharisee assessed himself, he thought he was doing pretty well. When the tax collector assessed himself, he confessed his sinfulness to God and pleaded for His mercy.

Which one made an accurate assessment? Jesus said that it was the tax collector who went home justified rather than the Pharisee!

C. S. Lewis once wrote:

When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less.<sup>3</sup>

Somewhere in one of his many sermons, C. H. Spurgeon put it this way: “Sinners think themselves to be righteous men; righteous men know themselves to be sinners.”

***Arrogant self-trust or genuine repentance and faith?***

That’s what Jesus was saying here. *Through this parable, Jesus portrayed the difference between arrogant self-trust and genuine repentance and faith.*

We look at what He says and how He used a Pharisee in this parable to illustrate this arrogant self-trust, and we say, “Amen, Jesus.” We think it fits them and not us.

But maybe we need to take a closer look.

While Jesus *did* use a Pharisee to make His point, He told the parable *for those who were trusting in themselves* that they were righteous.

Commenting on this passage in one of his letters, the great ancient church father Augustine wrote:

Does it not strike you when the Lord says in the Gospel, “When the Son of Man comes, do you think he will find faith on the earth?” Knowing that some would arrogantly attribute this faith to themselves, he immediately said, “To some who seemed to themselves to be just and despised others, he spoke this parable . . . .”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, there’s always the danger that when we start assessing our faith, we’ll think we have genuine faith when we’re actually trusting in ourselves and our own good works.

While the New Testament does clearly teach that genuine faith leads to good works, it’s easy for us to fall prey to the temptation to trust in our works to make us right with God. But the fact is that they won’t. They can’t. And yet that temptation is always lurking . . .

It is in reality a temptation to arrogance, to vain pride, to think that we can be good enough to earn God’s favor.

And then we read *this story*. And through it Jesus reminds us all over again that *genuine faith trusts in who God is and what He’s like rather than in what we’ve done*.

It reminds us of His mercy and grace that we can’t earn, of His readiness to be gracious that the prophet so eloquently spoke of in Isaiah 30:18—

**Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you;  
therefore he will rise to show you compassion.  
For the LORD is a God of justice.  
Blessed are all who wait for him.**

In his book, *Holiness by Grace*, Bryan Chapell tells about some friends whose teenage son

rebelled against them and against God. For four years he tried to claim that what he was doing was all innocent. Over and over he promised to “straighten up.” But all the excuses were unjustified, and each time, his promise was broken.

His parents had experienced so much pain, embarrassment, and discouragement. One day the wife confided to Chapell and his wife that she didn’t know if she even loved her son anymore. Bitterness had made her heart hard against her own child.

After another incident for which the son wouldn’t take responsibility, the mother walked away. As the son sat alone on the sofa in the family room, he began to look at a family photo album. Pictures of happier days began to stir his heart.

One picture particularly struck him. He called his mother back into the room to look at it.

It was a picture of him as a young child under her approving smile. He said, “Mom, when I see this picture, I understand why you don’t know if you can love me anymore. In the picture, hope fills your eyes as you look down at your little boy. But I dashed all your hopes, Mom. Please forgive me for dashing all your hopes.”

And what did this mother do?

The hardness in her heart melted and she embraced her son with a renewed love for him.

It wasn’t protests of innocence or promises to do better that moved her. It was this accurate assessment of what he had done, this cry of absolute desperation—the same kind of cry to which God responds with mercy.<sup>5</sup>

**“God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”**

Amen.

†MEG

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, 2011 edition.

<sup>2</sup> These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 278-280; *Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, Malcolm Tolbert, “Luke” (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 140-142; *The IVP New Testament Commentary*, vol. 3, Darrell Bock, “Luke” (Downers Grove, IL, 1994), 295-297; *The New American Commentary*, vol. 24, Robert Stein, “Luke” (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 447-452; and Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 199-201.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 4; cited on [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>4</sup> Letter 89, quoted in the *ACCS*, 279.

<sup>5</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 26-27, cited on [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).