

Heaven Hears the Humble

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. I'm happy, but also a bit nervous to be serving steadfast in this capacity. Today, we're going to close out our listen series on the parables that we've been doing this summer.

Jenny's going to come up and read our parable for us today. And I would like you to just listen like an original hearer would have. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Thank you, Jenny.

[1 : 14] Now that we've heard the passage, we can find it in our Bibles in Luke chapter 18, starting in verse 9. I'm going to open us with a word of prayer.

Lord, please calm my nerves this morning. Help me to speak in a clear way. Take away anything that I say that might be unhelpful or unclear.

Help us to learn more about you today and the things that you're going to show us about your kingdom in this passage.

Amen. While traveling on Independence Day this summer, we passed a car on the side of the highway with a flat tire.

It was a busy highway. After driving past it for a few minutes and considering the heavy traffic and the high school age of the vehicle's occupants, I felt like we should go back and help.

[2 : 25] While I was on the side of the highway helping change the tire on that vehicle, one or two other cars did stop and check on us, but hundreds of cars passed, both before we had stopped and while we were there helping.

Most of them didn't even bother slowing down or trying to move over and give us any extra space. During this time, and also for a period of time afterwards, it was easy to compare our family's response to the response of all of those other vehicles driving by.

We were the good guys, and we stopped to help. But all of those other vehicles driving by, all those people, they were bad guys.

They were driving by without any care at all. Just last Sunday, in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, we saw how comparison caused problems and robbed joy from the workers.

Today, we can look at how comparing ourselves to others can cause yet another problem, and that's pride. So we're going to start by looking at the text now, in verse 9.

[3 : 52] It says, He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. Some of the parables we've looked at this summer, we need to get through quite a ways before we find the point that Jesus is making.

Not this one. Here, we needed a spoiler alert. There will still be some surprises and twists in our passage today, but Luke's intro gives us some pretty solid context.

We don't know exactly who is in this group of people, but it could have been some Pharisees, or it could have been followers of Jesus who were acting in this way, trusting in themselves that they were righteous and treating others with contempt.

Moving on to verse 10, we start the parable with Jesus talking. He says, Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector.

Here, Jesus is giving context to his listeners that everyone hearing would have understood. We today might want to assign both characters of the parable as villains, but it's important to consider the hearer's context.

[5 : 27] The Pharisee would have been the obvious hearer, the obvious hero to them with this starting information. He would be seen as belonging in our setting of the temple, respected by his peers and the community.

You would want this guy as your neighbor. On the other hand, the tax collector is the obvious bad guy and known to not even really belong in the temple.

Tax collectors were Jews, but they worked for the Romans, and they were seen as traitors and sellouts. They had a lot of discretion about how much extra to take, and as you can imagine, many took lots extra.

Because of all of this, a tax collector like him may not have even been allowed all the way inside the temple. Jesus is starting the story with an extreme contrast of people in the community, and the stereotypical roles that the hearers would have noticed would have been really obvious.

So, the stage of our parable has been set, and as we continue, we first hear from the Pharisee our expected hero, picking up at verse 11.

[6 : 52] The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. At first glance, the Pharisee has a pretty decent character list going here.

He's not a robber. He's seen as just. He's faithful to his wife. And he surely wouldn't steal from his community like the tax collector that he's having to share this space with right now.

To round off his trait list, he gives and he fasts significantly more than the law required. Seems like a pretty decent guy.

It's not these admirable traits that Jesus wants us to notice, though. In verse 11, some translations help us out a bit more here and say, the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself or to himself.

[8 : 07] He then uses five I's in just two sentences. We can start to see that the Pharisee's heart is corrupt with pride and self-reliance.

Psalms 10:4 says, In his pride, the wicked man does not seek him. In all his thoughts, there is no room for God.

It seems that the Pharisee's pride has him here. Though initially, his prayer was addressed to God, this prayer actually has no room for God at all.

Remember, Luke told us that this parable was being told to some who trusted in themselves and they were treating others with contempt.

Some of the hearers may have never prayed in this exact way out loud, but they had almost certainly thought similar things. This parable might be getting offensive to the hearers.

[9 : 20] next we'll see what Jesus tells us about our other character, the tax collector. Verse 13.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

So here we see that the tax collector stood off or at a distance. I had mentioned earlier that the tax collector would not have fit in, maybe would not have been allowed in the same parts of the temple as the Pharisee.

So, we can see he's somewhere distant from where the Pharisee prayed, and he would not even lift his head to heaven, but beat his breast. This action of beating his breast would have been seen as an extreme expression of sorrow.

Kind of a primal beating as if you had no other way to cope. The beating of the breast may not have been just like one or two hits on somebody's chest either.

[10 : 37] It could have been a long-lasting action, and the hearers might have seen it that way. Then we get to the tax collector's few words.

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Looking at the original language, be merciful in this verse could be translated as propitiation, that is, appeasing of God's wrath.

So, the tax collector's humility in his prayer here is giving him a clear view of his condition. He is recognizing his need for mercy as a sinner.

So, Jesus has now given us, given the audience, a familiar stage of the temple. He's given them familiar characters, a Pharisee and a tax collector.

And with these characters came their stereotypes of a respected community member and a hated villain. Like other parables that teach us about the heavenly kingdom, you might be thinking that we are heading towards a twist from the earthly thinking about our characters.

[12:01] And you would be right. Verse 14. Jesus says, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. The first thing I noticed in this verse is the salvific language of the word justified.

Jesus' words are always important, but it seems that we should really be paying attention now. Jesus is going to spell it out for us.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke might have given us a bit of a spoiler for this parable, but now Jesus is really driving the point home.

The Pharisee's heart was filled with pride and self-reliance, even though his actions and his listed character traits were good, they're good things.

[13:11] They were blinding him of his need for mercy. The tax collector's humble heart allowed him to clearly see his condition and to ask for mercy.

In this parable, both the Pharisee and the tax collector received exactly what they asked for in their prayers. The tax collector asked for mercy and he received it.

The Pharisee asked for nothing and he received nothing. He was too busy comparing himself to others and praising himself.

What could this parable mean for all of us today? Maybe you're like the tax collector.

You're recognizing as you sit today your desperate need for mercy. This might be a new clear view of your sin, a fresh and frightening view of the wrath of God that you deserve.

[14:22] You fear looking towards heaven and are filled with sorrow. Jesus used the extreme character example of one of the worst people around, a tax collector, in this story to show that mercy is available to anyone.

You, no matter your sins, can go home justified. Pride. Now, since sanctification is a process, maybe you've been in the tax collector's shoes already.

You've had that experience. You recognized that need. But now, weeks, months, maybe decades later, you can see pride sneaking into your life.

Like I did, changing that tire on the side of a busy highway. You're comparing yourself to others with a self-righteous attitude, maybe even treating others with contempt based on that attitude.

There's good news for us here also. Every Sunday, we are reminded from Lamentations that his mercies are new every morning, and we can continue to bring our sinful condition to God and ask for mercy.

[15:57] Although sometimes, or even always, to some extent, we feel the shame of our sin to keep our head down and steal our joy, joy, it makes us want to beat our breast.

We don't need to let that shame keep our head down and steal our joy. Let's live and pray with humility, but when we need to ask for mercy, and I know I will, we can remember that our Father always hears and answers that prayer.

Paul, who called himself the worst sinner, is explaining his struggling with sin in Romans 7, but then in Romans 8, verse 1 tells us that therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

What a great thing to think about as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper in a few minutes. Parables are stories that Jesus told us to make people think.

They challenge our assumptions, they shake up our expectations, and press us to consider what we truly believe about God, about his kingdom, and about his call on our lives.

[17:32] Hebrews 4, 16 says, let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

As we go forward, let's pray with humility like the tax collector, but the confidence that because of Jesus, God's mercy is always new every morning.

Let anyone who has ears to hear listen. Let's pray. God, thank you for your word and the parables that we've been able to learn from this summer.

Thank you for the ways that you've showed us about your kingdom and how it is so much better than our earthly kingdom.

Thank you for your mercy that you give us new every day. Amen.