

Bible Study Guide: Week of 10-17-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 18:9-14

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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Luke tells us that Jesus addressed this parable to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” While this seems a very specific address, perhaps to people who were themselves Pharisees, as we will see by the end of this little parable, a lot of it seems to apply to us personally. It seems everyone has times and ways in which we regard others with contempt and/or trust in our own righteousness. Indeed, it is the universality of this parable that makes it so compelling. We are all the Pharisee at times; we are all the tax collector at times, as well.

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We need to be careful to avoid reading anti-Jewish bias into the character of the Pharisee. It is important to remember that both the Pharisee and the tax collector would have been Jewish. Both ascend to the Jewish temple to pray. The Christian caricature of Judaism as oppressively legalistic has done much harm to our Jewish neighbors and our understanding of them. We often forget that Jewish adherence to the law is not a legalistic effort at self-righteousness; rather it is an act of devotion to God. Keeping the law is not a burden, it is a joy. The self-righteousness that the Pharisee displays is not by virtue of his status as a Pharisee or a Jew; it is by virtue of his status as a human being. We all have these tendencies toward self-righteousness at times. The virtues that the Pharisee lifts up—fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of all of his income—are good things on their face. The issue is not with his good works in and of themselves. Good deeds, even if done with the wrong motivation are still good. The issue is that he is comparing himself with others rather than showing compassion for them. The “demands” of the law are for the good of God’s people, not for one individual person alone. The man has remembered to do the good things God has commanded, but he has failed to remember to love his neighbors as himself. He is standing “by himself”—literally and figuratively.

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The tax collector, meanwhile, displays none of the marks of virtue that the Pharisee displays. Yet notice he doesn't regard anything or anyone other than God and his own pitiful state. He sees the truth about himself that the Pharisee readily identified about him. Unlike the Pharisee, however, he doesn't compare himself to others. Rather, he throws himself on the mercy of God. Whereas the Pharisee asks God for nothing and receives nothing, the tax collector asks for mercy and "goes down to his home justified."

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The goal of the Pharisee's virtuous actions (i.e. the keeping of the law) was to ensure love of God and love of neighbor. The Pharisee, unfortunately, fell into the common trap of love of self. He has exalted himself and has gone home empty. The tax collector, meanwhile, throws himself on the mercy of God and does not come away empty. He has humbled himself and has gone home in a better state than when he came. This idea of reversal in the kingdom of God comes up again and again in Luke's gospel—in Mary's Magnificat, in Jesus' insistence that the last will be first and the first will be last, and in Jesus' teaching that he has come to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). The paradox for us in this parable is this: If we stand in judgment of the Pharisee, we are in grave danger of repeating his mistake. We begin to pray, "God, thank you that I'm not like that Pharisee..." This parable, then, is a trap for us, revealing that we are all guilty at times of regarding others with contempt and trusting in our own righteousness.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Which do you struggle with more: trusting in yourself that you are righteous or regarding others with contempt? Why?**
- 2. Why do you think the tax collector went home justified rather than the Pharisee? What does it mean to "be justified"?**
- 3. Why do you think the Pharisee compares himself with other people and lifts up examples of his own faithful living in his prayer?**