

Madonna (**picture**) or Mother Teresa (**picture**)? Gang Banger (**picture**) or Firefighter (**picture**)? Nurse (**picture**) or Child Pornographer? Muslim (**picture**) or Marine (**picture**)? Who would you feel uncomfortable sitting next to this morning? If Madonna or a gangbanger or child pornographer or a Muslim walked in and sat beside you, would you move? All of us have those that we're uncomfortable around. If they sat down beside us, it'd bother us.

Jesus tells a story, a parable. He's trying to shock His audience. It would have been as shocking, if not more for his listeners than the contrasts I shared. My Bible is open to Luke 18:9-14 (p. 877). This is one of Jesus' most well-known stories. It's the second parable in a row where Jesus talks about prayer, but this parable isn't about prayer, it's about the audience. *"Jesus also told this parable to **some** who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*

For Jesus' audience, the hero would be the Pharisee, the scoundrel was the tax collector. Though today we think of Pharisees as hypocritical, pious snobs, that wasn't the view in Jesus' day. Pharisees were the good guys. They were revered and respected, much like a doctor or banker today. Tax collectors were despised. They were traitors, accomplices with Rome.

Think John Walker Lindh (**picture**), the American who fought alongside the Taliban against American forces and labeled the "American Taliban." Tax collectors were thieves and swindlers.

Most of us identify with the tax collector, but Jesus' audience identified with the Pharisee. This story is about who's accepted by God. It's a polemic against spiritual pride. But this parable is so familiar to us, we can easily miss what Jesus is saying.

It's an uncomfortable story. Jesus meant it to be. And we need this because if we're really honest, we're more like the Pharisee than the tax collector. We'd rather be on a committee with the Pharisee, meet him for coffee, have him over for dinner...than a tax collector. A tax collector would be on the level of a pedophile or abortionist.

Most people believe good people go to Heaven and bad ones go to Hell. That's not what Scripture teaches. This parable unpacks **God's Great Reversal**. It shocks us like it shocked them.

David Dykes (**picture**) pastors a Baptist church in Tyler, Texas. He re-wrote and paraphrased this story for modern times. Let me share it with you:

As Baptist Bob walked into church one Sunday morning, he was disgusted to see Larry Lowlife there, for Larry was a drug pusher who'd just gotten out of jail. Bob warned some of the ushers to keep a close watch on Larry because he was a no-good crook.

Before the offering, it was Bob's time to pray. He walked proudly to the microphone and began to pray using his religious tone of voice, "Heavenly Father, I thank Thee that I've been a deacon in this church for 20 years. I even remember when I built this building using my own two hands. And I thank Thee that I haven't missed a single Sunday for over ten years...Thou hast blessed me financially so I've been able to give you much more than 10 percent. I thank thee that I'm morally pure for I don't drink, I don't cuss on Sundays, I don't smoke and I don't take drugs or sell them, like someone who is among us today. Lord, we need more people just like me in our church.... And, Lord, bless the gift and the giver. AMEN."

After napping through much of the sermon, Baptist Bob strolled out of church feeling good about himself because he made it through another Sunday. He liked leaving church because he didn't have to think about God again until the next Sunday.

Meanwhile, Larry Lowlife was slouched on the back pew. After hearing the message about God's forgiveness, he slipped to his knees, and began to pray. Holding his face in his hands he sobbed quietly, "God, I'm the dirtiest sinner in this town. I'm so sorry. I don't deserve it, but is there any way you can wash away my filthy mistakes? Please, God, I need you!"

I tell you, it was Larry Newlife, not Baptist Bob, who went home that day right with God. For he who struts his stuff before God will eventually be slapped down. But when you admit you're like dirt compared to God's purity, He'll pick you up and clean you up.

So, who are you more like this morning, the Pharisee or the Publican? This powerful story of two men, two postures, two prayers and two outcomes is a message we desperately need. God values humility but we're arrogant. God values repentance but we put on pious facades. More than I want to admit it, I'm a Pharisee. Maybe you are too. We need to beat our chests in repentance like this tax collector and do some heart surgery. So, if you're taking notes...

1.Jesus gives His strongest warnings to "good" church people. Nearly 50 years later, he still holds the record for the leading scorer in NCAA Division 1 Men's Basketball. He achieved that record before the 3-point shot and when college

freshmen weren't allowed to play Varsity, so he missed a year but he still holds the scoring record. When, "Pistol Pete" Maravich (**picture**) left LSU, he enjoyed a great NBA career. But in his mid-forties, he was out near his home in Pasadena, playing a pickup basketball game with some friends when he suddenly died. Later, it was determined the cause of death was a very rare heart condition no one had picked up on. Just hours before Maravich played that fatal game he'd told one of his good friends, when they asked him how he was doing, "Feeling great. Never better." Pete Maravich illustrates physically what can happen to us spiritually. That's what Jesus was after. Everything can look great on the outside, but on the inside, we have a serious heart defect.

The most difficult people to reach with the gospel are not down and outers. It's good people. It's the moral and religious crowd. Years ago I worked at a church in LaCrosse. There was a dear lady who loved the Lord and was very involved in the church, but her husband was an unbeliever. Roger though was the nicest guy, a hard worker, moral, good provider. That was the problem. He was too good to get saved. You must realize you're a mess before you'll turn to Jesus, begging Him to clean you up.

One of the markers of "good lost people," is in our text. They look down on others and *treat others with contempt*. Our attitude toward *bad* people says more about our spiritual condition than perhaps anything else. Pride is a subtle yet vile sin. It's deceptive and enticing. Someone said that "*pride is the only sickness everyone can recognize except the person who has it.*" We like to think of ourselves as a little better than others, a little more moral.

Most of us are conservatives. With the inflammatory days we live in, it's tempting to look down our self-righteous noses at liberals, gays, welfare recipients, the transgendered. When we do, it speaks volumes about the putrid condition of our hearts, pulling back the cover on self-righteousness.

Often we're like the guy who complained about the amount of time his family spent in front of the TV. His girls watched cartoons and neglected schoolwork. His wife preferred soap operas to housework. His solution? "As soon as the baseball season's over, I'm going to pull the plug." It's easy to fall into the sin of self-righteousness and not even know it.

2. The self-righteous are in eternal danger, "*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.'*" This guy had problems but one problem that he didn't have – he's not a liar. Everything he said about himself was true. He wasn't a thief or an adulterer. He looks great on the outside. But his focus is external. He believed that he was accepted by God because of all that he did. He thinks he's praying to God but he's not. He's praying to himself. Five times he uses the 1st person pronoun, "I."

But he's not a hypocrite. He's completely sincere in his devotion...mistaken, yet sincere. As a result, he's self-deceived. He sees himself at the center of his life. God exists to be impressed by him.

This Pharisee came to the temple so others could see how good he was. It's a public performance, his prayer just part of the script. He'd given a lot of thought about what he'd wear, where he'd stand, and what he'd say. When he arrived, he walked to the front of the temple and stood before the rest of the people in his flowing robe with the ornate prayer shawl the Pharisees (**picture**) wore. It was a big religious show. One rabbi, Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai (**picture**) once said, "*If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he.*"

In that culture, prayer was either silent or uttered in a low voice. Praying loud was considered rude. Please notice that he doesn't ask God for anything or praise God. It's not a prayer. It's a press release.

Jesus warned of this kind of behavior in Matthew 6:5, "*But when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.*" It's a temptation we all face, to be seen by others. When you're preparing to come to church, do you think more about who will be there to see you than about connecting with God? Do you choose what to wear based on what others will think about you? Some actually go to church because they think it'll help them in their business, or in politics, or improve their social standing. *Why do you attend church?* We all struggle with the temptation of seeking to please people rather than God.

The self-righteous are alone in their ego, "*The Pharisee, standing by himself.*" Puritan Divine, Benjamin Whichcote (**picture**) said, "*None are so empty as those who are full of themselves.*" Arrogance breeds loneliness.

Yet, Jesus taught that prayer is a team endeavor, "*where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them*" (Matt. 18:20). The Pharisee was too good to gather with others. Do you dodge others because you erroneously think you're superior to them?

The self-righteous compare themselves with others, "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*" Such blatant arrogance shocks us. Yet, how often do we think like that? We'd probably word it a bit differently: "God, I thank You that I haven't fallen into the sins that many around me have – adultery or addiction – the gutter life of so many of the unchurched."

Those who find security in comparison are deluded and utterly unbiblical in their understanding of God and His saving grace. How unlike the Apostle Paul, “*For I know that nothing good dwells in me...*” (Romans 7:18). Pride blinds us to our own faults but magnifies the failures of others. When we compare ourselves to others, we’re using a false standard. God’s measuring stick is not the goodness or badness of another; His standard is Jesus. How do you measure up to Him? Some believe they’re good because they’ve never robbed a bank or murdered anyone. Sure, when you compare yourself to some serial murderer, you look like a moral hero, but God doesn’t grade on the curve. It doesn’t matter if you’re better than average. What matters is: Have you repented of your sin? Do you have a relationship with Christ?

The Pharisee sounds a lot like Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, (**picture**) who wrote, “*I must get used to the idea, once and for all, that I am an exceptional human being...I have not met one man who is morally as good as I am.*”

The self-righteous focus on what they do, “*I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*” He foolishly thought he was accepted by God because of what he did. Mosaic Law required Jews to fast just once a year on the Day of Atonement, but he fasts twice a week. He tithed everything that came into his possession, even little herbs from his garden. Can you imagine tithing on thyme? Instead of depending on God’s grace, he’s trusting in his own accomplishments. He has few obvious vices, but many commendable virtues. Most of us would love to have him as a neighbor or employee, but he’s unfit for heaven. Heaven is not for good people.

The Pharisee focuses on his good deeds, fasting and giving, plus a whole lot more things he’d done. But he’s oblivious to his own evil heart that’s filled with pride. God sees his heart though. The truth is that we can smile and be friendly toward someone, while our heart hates that person and plots revenge. Outwardly, we can give big bucks and others would say, “What a generous person!” But God see our motives. Did we give it to please God or receive the applause of others? God looks on the heart.

No one who honestly examines his heart can hope to come before God on the basis of good works. We may clean up our outward behavior, but we can’t clean up our hearts. Only God can do that through the power of the new birth. That all brings us to the second man in the parable, the tax collector...

3. The guilty sinner is closest to God, “*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!’*” It’s not a big surprise to meet a Pharisee in the temple, but it’s the last place you’d expect to meet a tax-collector, and especially to hear him praying. Tax collectors were the worst of the worst.. Who do you find despicable in our culture? That’s the tax collector.

What we have here is a contrast of grace! After the Pharisee’s pious platitudes, came the tax gatherer’s pitiful prayer. He won’t even look up to heaven. The contrast is intense. The Pharisee stood in the place of prominence. The tax collector stood at a distance, barely within the temple. The Pharisee stands erect with his eyes open to heaven. The tax collector can’t bring himself to lift his head. The Pharisee confidently prayed, the tax collector is broken over what he was and had done. Like the Pharisee, the tax collector verbalized his prayer, yet what a difference. It’s one thing to publicly announce your virtues as the Pharisee did. But who proclaims their sins like this tax collector. He’s pariah in the eyes of others like the Pharisee, and in his own eyes, and he knows full well, he’s pariah in the eyes of God.

It’s why the tax collector had no desire to compare himself with others, but instead cries out, *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!* In the original, it’s not *a*, but *the* sinner. In other words, “I’m everything people say I am, and worse. I won’t attempt to make myself look better by comparing myself with someone else. I am the sinner.” And he’s not exaggerating. He’s every bit as evil as he said he was. That’s why, though a Jew, he was excluded from the temple and ostracized by the “good” people. It’s an authentic and very personal prayer, and a humble one. Like him, you and I will never be *good* with God until we first know how *bad* we are.

Evangelist D. L. Moody (**picture**) visited a prison called “The Tombs” to preach to the inmates. After he’d finished preaching, Moody talked with a number of men in their cells. He asked each prisoner this question, “What brought you here?” Again and again he received replies like: “*I don’t deserve to be here. I was framed. I was falsely accused. I wasn’t given a fair trial. The judge or a witness took a bribe.*” Not one inmate would admit he was guilty. But Moody finally found a man with his face buried in his hands, weeping. “What’s wrong, my friend?” he asked. The prisoner responded, “My sins are more than I can bear.” Relieved to find at least one man who recognized his guilt and need of forgiveness, the Evangelist exclaimed, “Thank God for that!” Then, Moody then led him to a saving knowledge of Christ, a knowledge that released him from the shackles of his sin.

This broken tax collector has **two attitudes** essential for God’s forgiveness.

To be forgiven you must have a healthy sense of shame before God, “*would not even lift up his eyes to heaven*” Our debauched culture has lost any sense of shame, even going so far as to proclaim the evils of shame. A sense of shame offers our only hope of grace. J. I. Packer (**picture**) has suggested, “*Seek the grace to be ashamed.*” The opposite of righteousness isn’t evil, it’s shame. Yet, like our first parents, we do everything we can to cover it. Even Mark Twain (**picture**) agreed with Scripture when he said, “*Man is the only animal that blushes. And the only animal that needs to.*”

When the tax collector caught a glimpse of the holiness of God, he realized how dirty he was. Scripture says, *“All our righteousness is as filthy rags.”* (Isaiah 64:6) Even the good things we do are filthy compared to the brilliant holiness of God. When you see God for Who He is—holy, then you see yourself for who you really are—a fallen creature in desperate need of God’s mercy. That will humble you in a hurry. Have you come to a place where you know you can’t make it without God’s mercy? It’s the only way we can come to God. We’re all unworthy sinners who deserve judgment. We must come honestly and confess, *“God, I’m a sinner who deserves nothing but Your judgment.”* Charles Simeon (picture) observed, *“Never are you higher in God’s esteem than when you are lowest in your own”*

To be forgiven you must repent and cry out to God for undeserved mercy, “but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” It’s a simple prayer, seven words in English. It’s short and to the point. He clings to nothing, but the pure mercy of God. If that can’t save him, there’s no hope. Beating his breast is an act of repentance and humility.

His plea, *“Have mercy on me,”* is the opening line of Psalm 51, the great penitential Psalm of King David following his adultery and murder of Uriah. In it David repents and sings of God’s forgiveness. This man’s only hope is that as God forgave the heinous sins of King David, God would forgive his monstrous treacheries too.

His plea for mercy is linked to the temple and its system of sacrifices for forgiveness. He cries out for God’s mercy, not on the basis of his own merits, but on God’s commitment to be merciful to sinners as illustrated through the sacrifices taking place in the temple. He knew God’s wrath was justly upon him. The merciful removal of God’s anger was his only hope.

Be merciful is an unusual Greek verb. It means to *propitiate*. In other words, to atone for sin by means of a blood sacrifice. He’s asking God to make atonement for his sin, covering his guilt and protecting him from eternal judgement. Although this man, living under the Jewish sacrificial system, probably didn’t understand that Jesus would offer Himself as the perfect and final Lamb of God for the sins of the world, he did know that without the sacrifice of another and shedding of blood, there was no forgiveness for sins.

Yet, it wasn’t the blood of bulls or goats that atoned for sin. They merely pointed ahead to what God’s Son would do in offering Himself in the place of sinners. They illustrate the principle of substitution. God would accept the death of an acceptable substitute in the place of the sinner’s own death. A holy God can’t just shrug off our sins or He wouldn’t be just and righteous. The penalty for sin must be paid. Either we pay it (which is impossible) or we trust in God to pay it for us through the sacrifice of His Son. To cry out to God for mercy is to trust in the only provision God has made for the penalty of our sins, the death of the Lord Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

4. Heaven is only for the repentant, *“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.”*

Ask most people, *“Why do you think you’re going to heaven?”* and they will nearly always answer, *“because I’m a good person.”* The tendency of works-righteousness is deeply ingrained in each of us. It’s why it’s hard to overstate how revolutionary Jesus’ conclusion is.

The justified one is the sinner who approaches God on the basis of His mercy, rather than the “good” man who approaches God on the basis of his own merit. Jesus destroys the foundation of nearly every religion. Nearly every religion teaches that God’s favor is earned by our good works. Christianity alone teaches that God’s favor is given because of His mercy to those who repent and seek His forgiveness. It’s truly grace alone!

Justification is the legal declaration that a sinner has been made right with God. By this legal declaration, a sinner is acquitted of all charges, spared from all punishment and considered acceptable to God. It’s what the tax collector received. God declared him righteous, not because of anything he’d done. All he’d done was sin. He’s justified on the basis of God’s mercy.

But God didn’t justify the Pharisee. That would have shocked Jesus’ listeners. Though the Pharisee, declared his own righteousness, he’s never declared justified by God. His “righteous” acts are the problem. He’s too busy being self-righteous to cry to God for mercy and receive God’s righteousness which only comes as a gift from God. Sadly, there’s a little Pharisee in all of us. We think we’re good and others are bad. Scripture clearly teaches that we’re all bad, *“all have sinned”* (Rom. 3:23). The hardest people to be saved are religious ones who think their goodness makes them VIPs with God. The easiest person to be saved is the one who’ll admit to God that he’s sinned horribly and has to have mercy, or he’s a goner.

Evangelist Eddie Martin was conducting a crusade in Bluefield, West Virginia. At the invitation a well-dressed woman came forward. It was Evangelist Martin’s custom to have them repeat the sinner’s prayer with him. So, he took her hand and prayed, *“Dear Lord, I know that I am a sinner. I know I can’t save myself. I need forgiveness for my awful sins. Please accept me, Jesus.”* But as he prayed with this woman, she was silent. Finally, he looked at her and asked, *“Don’t*

you want to be saved?" She said, "Yes, I want to be saved, but I'm not a sinner." "Then you can't be saved," he said. "Jesus only died for sinners." "But Rev. Martin, I'm a *good* sinner!"

My friend, there are no good sinners. God does not help those who help themselves. He only helps and rescues the helpless.

Conclusion: Madonna or Mother Teresa? Gang Banger or Firefighter? Nurse or Child Pornographer? None of them yet, it could be all of them. We'll never be saved because we're good. We must humble ourselves and acknowledge how wicked we are. We must run to the cross, God's mercy seat, to receive God's grace.

So, who do you pray like? The Pharisee or tax collector? Eternity will tell. You may be a good person, a faithful churchgoer, a decent citizen, but God knows the condition of your heart. All the good deeds in the world can't pay for the many times you've sinned and broken His holy law. If you come into God's court on Judgment Day and present your good works, you'll be condemned. If you come as an unworthy sinner who's pleaded for mercy on the basis of Christ who shed His blood to pay the penalty you deserve, God will declare you, "Not guilty!" And you'll enter heaven justified.

The Pharisee thought he deserved salvation and therefore missed it. The tax collector knew he didn't deserve it. Because he knew that he didn't deserve it, he received it. Isn't that amazing? The mercy of God only comes to those who know that they're undeserving of it. The mercy of God misses those who think they deserve it. Let's tie this up with **Four Abiding Principles.**

This parable teaches us about the tremendous danger of religious self-deception. What would be the modern day counterpart of the religion of the Pharisees? If you say liberal unbelief, you're wrong. The Pharisees truly believed the word of God. The modern day counterpart is good, evangelical, Bible believing Christianity, like the kind we have here at Grace. Unless you have a life-changing encounter with Christ, good, evangelical Christianity will send you to Hell. Unless you have a personal life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, coming to this church will send you to Hell.

There will be countless people in Hell who went to church, read the Bible, served as ushers, led small groups, had the religious routine down pat, who looked as good on the outside as this Pharisee looked. *Why?* Because you don't go to heaven because you're a good person. Good religion leads you to Hell instead of heaven if it's not accompanied by a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. This story ought to make us go home and look in the mirror and ask: Do I have Christ on the inside or am I just playing church?

God looks at things differently than we do. When we get to heaven we're going to discover two things that will startle us. We're going to be startled to find many there we didn't expect to see there. Then, when we get to heaven we're going to discover that some people that we thought would be there aren't. They were like the Pharisee. It was all on the outside, but on the inside they didn't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The worst sinners often make the best candidates for salvation. Why? They know they need to be saved. The tax collector knew he didn't have a chance. The Pharisee thought he was doing God a favor by showing up.

The worst sinners often make the best candidate for salvation. Anybody here sleeping around? Using drugs? Anybody murdered someone? Anybody here far from God and you feel like you don't belong in church? Good news! You can be saved today! Run to the cross of Christ and embrace it as your only hope for salvation. The worst sinners can be saved.

Your only hope of going to heaven is to do what this bad man did. Cry out to God for mercy on the basis of the blood of Jesus Christ. It's a prayer God loves to answer. Do you want to go to heaven? You've got to get there by the grace of God or you won't get there at all. Salvation begins when a person understands he can't save himself. The door to heaven has a sign over the top that says, *FOR SINNERS ONLY*. If you qualify, come on in. Jesus died for sinners and for no one else. It's why the Pharisee was lost though he was good and the tax collector was saved though he was bad. One held on to his good works while the other clung to the mercy of God.

So, what will you do? Please don't attempt to be a good person or you'll perish. Please cry out to God for His mercy and run to the cross.