

AM I A PHARISEE ... OR A PUBLICAN?

By Pastor Doug Batchelor



In the book of Luke, Jesus shares a powerful parable that challenges you and me to do a little healthy soul searching. It depicts two men visiting the same church, both praying to the same God. But something between the two of them is very different.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon 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” ([Luke 18:10–14](#)).

The lesson plainly exposed on the surface, of course, is that humility is better than pride. But I have found many times with the Word of God that the longer we gaze into it, the

deeper and wider it gets. The more we invest exploring it, the more dividends of truth we accrue. And over time it has occurred to me there's much more in this parable than what we commonly see with just a brief glance.

A Shocking Parable

In Jesus' day the Pharisees were considered among the most pious and religious of all the believers in God. On the other hand, the publicans were branded as unfaithful and unjust extortionists. They were seen as the mafia of their day. You can see why, then, that Jesus' conclusion of this parable literally stunned His audience. It was an outrageous and politically incorrect illustration to suggest that a publican would be justified and saved while a Pharisee would be unforgiven and lost. We'll look more at this later, but Jesus turned their ranking system upside down.

These men represent two groups, but we are not talking about two groups in the world. Rather, these two men represent two opposite destinies, the saved and the lost, among those who go to church. Every professed believer today falls into one of these groups. One of these men represents me. One represents you.

Which one?

We each need to ask for humility and guidance from the Holy Spirit when considering this question. You might be thinking you're a publican when you're really a Pharisee or vice versa. Or you might be some of both. It's important we study this parable because we are all one of these guys, and we want to make sure we're the one Jesus forgives.

Some Common Ground

These men had a few things in common. First, they both believed in God. If you want to be in the saved group, that's a good start!

But believing in God is not the only criteria for salvation. “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble” ([James 2:19](#)). Because devils also believe there is a God, there must be something more to being saved.

Both men also went to church. This too is important if you want to be in the saved group. I have often said that if you don’t have enough faith to get you to church once a week, it’s not likely you will have enough faith to get you to heaven for eternity.

Sometimes people excuse not going to church by claiming there are hypocrites there. But I say not to worry; there’s always room for one more. Besides, Jesus went to church every Sabbath even though it was peppered with hypocrites, some of whom even wanted Him dead.

Others complain that church is boring. But is the purpose of church to be entertained—or to worship God? And if your worship isn’t fulfilling, pray for God to change your heart. But go to church. Jesus set the example by teaching and worshipping in church every week ([Luke 4:16](#)).

The third thing these men had in common was that they both prayed. Jesus says in [Luke 18:1](#) that men “ought always to pray,” and Paul writes that we should “pray without ceasing” ([1 Thessalonians 5:17](#)). The saved indeed pray.

So we see both men believed in God. Both went to church. Both prayed. I’m hopeful you also practice these rudimentary elements of faith.

Now let’s consider some of their differences.

Am I Spiritually Proud?

The Pharisees proudly wore their piety. They were a hyper-conservative element of believers who were zealous about the Scriptures, the law of God, and the purity of the worship of Jehovah. When the Jews were captive in Babylon, the prophets told them they were overcome because of their unfaithfulness to God. In response, the sect of Pharisees

formed so that Israel would no longer allow themselves to be influenced by the surrounding pagan nations. Fastidious in the details of their religion, the Pharisees knew that if Israel were to fall into idolatry again, God might forever withdraw His protection.

So this was generally a good group of people who were just very zealous in their belief of keeping themselves undefiled by their environment.

Unfortunately, many and perhaps most of the Pharisees let their zealotry for obedience eclipse their love for their fellow man. Jesus called them on the carpet several times for their preoccupation with external religion and rebuked them for their self-righteous wickedness. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” ([Matthew 23:27](#)).

In this revealing parable, the Pharisee is a sanctimonious, hypocritical man.

Meet the Publicans

A publican, on the other hand, was the ancient version of a tax collector—though they were quite different from tax collectors today. When the Romans conquered a province, they didn’t speak the language and didn’t know the culture, but they needed the tax income. So instead of collecting taxes themselves, they allowed Jews to procure contracts to be tax collectors. The tax collectors were required to amass a certain amount of tax from their district and could keep a percentage over that amount for themselves. Many of them would exploit their position to extort vast sums to fill their own pockets. Zacchaeus was fabulously wealthy because he was a tax collector in Jericho.

The publicans were detested by the Jews, who considered them traitors for taking God’s money from His people and giving it to the pagans. The publicans were also known for keeping the bars open and being involved in prostitution. They represented the worst breed of sinners.

So in this parable about two people going to the temple to pray to God, the people naturally looked upon the Pharisees as the ones who were the closest to God. They looked upon the publicans as the most hopeless, God-forsaken untouchables. Yet Jesus favored the publican. The question is “Why?”

Peculiar Prayers and Posture

An important distinction between the two men was in the way they prayed. “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself” ([Luke 18:11](#)). He stood up, by himself, up front. He then thanked God that he was not like the publican. His head was up; his arms were stretched out.

But the publican’s prayer was entirely different. “The publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” ([Luke 18:13](#)). The publican was humbly standing in the back, not even daring to lift up his eyes.

At this point, the Pharisee began to chronicle all his good works. “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” (verse 12). He wanted people to know what he was doing and giving for the Lord. He proclaimed his adherence to the law. His prayer was actually self-exaltation.

In contrast, Christ began His ministry by saying, “All their works they do for to be seen of men” ([Matthew 23:5](#)). Jesus says that’s all the reward they’ll get ([Matthew 6:2](#)).

This parable is important for us, even today, because we still have Pharisees in church today.

The problem with this Pharisee was that he expressed no need of help. He didn’t seem to recognize that he had any problems or faults. All he saw were virtues.

Yet according to the Bible, his self-righteousness was worthless. “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” ([Matthew 5:20 NKJV](#)).

Here, Jesus is not holding up the righteousness of the Pharisees as a standard. Instead, He tells us we must rise above their standard to enter the kingdom of heaven. Their righteousness was before men. True righteousness must be before God.

“Take heed that ye do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward of your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men” ([Matthew 6:1 NKJV](#)).

It requires humility to secretly do good here on earth, to give something and not let anybody else know about it. It helps tame our spirit and reveals our motivation in doing good: Do we act so others will think of us as generous? Do we really care about the one we’re helping?

How Do I Pray?

“When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing” ([Matthew 6:5 NKJV](#)).

The idea of the parable is not that standing while praying is bad, but rather to examine why you are standing. Jesus doesn’t want us to make a spectacle of ourselves while we pray. Don’t draw attention to yourself, either through your actions or by your words.

Have you ever been in a group prayer and started preaching for the benefit of those around you instead of really talking from your heart to God? I have. I sometimes still do it with our children. We kneel with them to pray, asking the Lord to help them get good grades and help them clean their room. They’re right there with us, and our prayer has turned into a mini-sermon.

When we deliver little innuendos and messages in our prayers, that's one way we stand. That's the prayer of the Pharisee, "Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men."

Do you ever question another person's behavior? Are you ever thankful that you're not like that? Have you ever condemned another person's church clothing? "That's not at all respectful as my own modest attire is." The Lord hears, "Lord, I thank thee I am not as other men."

By the way, gossip is just an outward manifestation of this holier-than-thou attitude. Often we disguise our gossip as a prayer request! "I'm not gossiping, but I just wanted to mention this so we can pray about it." Then they reveal Sally went to lunch with Bruce, and they're both married ... but not to each other. Have you ever said something like that? In your heart, maybe you were really saying, "Lord, I thank thee I am not as other men."

Whom Do I Trust?

The Pharisee exalted his own religious practices at the expense of his neighbor. He trusted in his own good deeds to make him acceptable to God. He didn't plead the merits of Christ. Many good people will do this without realizing it.

Hezekiah was a good man and a good king. The Bible says he did "right in the sight of the Lord" ([2 Kings 18:3](#)). Then one day, God told Hezekiah to get his things in order; it was time to die. Hezekiah cries "foul" to the Lord, listing his impressive accomplishments. God mercifully heard his prayer and granted him 15 more years, during which Hezekiah had to learn a lesson in humility. In those extra days, good king Hezekiah developed the Pharisee mentality and failed to sense his sin and his need for God.

The Pharisee in our parable was in the same boat. He measured himself with others rather than with God. He lacked a humble, contrite spirit. He felt no need of God and made no request in his prayer. His thanks was not thanking God for being God. His thanks was for himself. Five times in his prayer he said, "I." It is an entirely self-centered speech.

Typically, even the self-centered prayer is to ask for something. “God, do this for me. Lord, give me that.” It’s okay to pray about our needs. Jesus even says to ask God for our daily bread ([Matthew 6:11](#)). But many times we’ll throw in requests for things we don’t need, wasting breath that could be spent on praying for others.

Remarkably, the Pharisee made no request at all. He was so self-righteous that he believed he didn’t need anything. He basked in a false sense of personal righteousness, the one thing that most disqualified him for heaven! C.S. Lewis said, “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.”

Self Worship

The publican and the Pharisee both believed in God, but it turns out one was worshipping himself. The Pharisee was confident in his own works for salvation; the publican pleaded for mercy from God.

Does this remind you of two other men? Two brothers bring their offerings to God. They both pray, but Cain is confident in his own work, offering the fruit from his vegetable garden. Abel seeks God’s mercy, bringing a lamb and depending on the blood of this substitute to cover his sin. When he sees his self-righteousness is spurned by God, Cain despises and kills his brother. We will see this same scenario repeated in the last days.

Going back even further, Lucifer fell into the same trap. He became enamored with himself. Pride turned into self worship, which spawned jealousy and murder. Those who follow the devil model the devil’s attitude and behavior, and all its various forms of self worship.

In [Luke 18:12](#), the Pharisee reminded the Lord about his good works, one of which was fasting twice a week. It was only required by the Jews to fast once a year at one of the feasts, during the Passover.

There's nothing wrong with fasting. In fact, most of us ought to do more of it. There's nothing wrong with praying nor giving either. The problem is when you do these things for the wrong reason—that's the difference between the publican and the Pharisee. It has to do with motives. John Wesley said, "Good men avoid sin from the love of virtue; wicked men avoid sin from a fear of punishment."

Jesus taught, "When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they might appear to men to be fasting" ([Matthew 6:16 NKJV](#)).

The Pharisee lifted himself up in the sight of men. This gave him a sense of pride and worth, yes, but he didn't find that in God's eyes. When he wanted to find out what the standard was and where he stood relative to it, he looked around and compared himself to other men. Paul addresses this fatal attitude, saying, "We dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" ([2 Corinthians 10:12](#)).

Woe Is Me

We can always find somebody worse off spiritually than we are. The publican was probably not the worst sinner in the immediate area, but he didn't compare himself to men. He didn't pray with a horizontal perspective; rather, he compared himself to God and begged for mercy because he saw that the gap was huge.

Isaiah, in the presence of God, said, "Woe is me" ([Isaiah 6:5](#)). The Pharisee, in the presence of the publican, said, "I'm not that bad." We all do this sometimes. Whether it's about self-esteem or a skewed defense mechanism, we feel better, and perhaps anesthetize our guilt, if we can find someone else to criticize. We recite to the Lord our virtues and list the failures of others, trying to convince Him, or just ourselves, that we're not that bad.

But we must stop trying to lift ourselves up like this. It simply doesn't work. Rather, we should compare ourselves to Jesus, lifting Him up as our example and standard. That's the only way we can be truly lifted up. "Humble yourself before the Lord, and He will lift you up" ([James 4:10 NKJV](#)).

A certain king invited a musician to sing and play at a state dinner celebrating their nation's birthday. A great many VIPs were assembled.

When the minstrel laid his fingers among the strings of his harp, he played the sweetest melody, but the words he sang were entirely to the glory of himself. It was one ballad after another celebrating his travels, handsome appearance, talents, and exploits. When the feast was over, the harpist said to the monarch, "Oh king, please give me my pay."

The monarch replied, "You have sung to yourself. You did not sing of your country, people, or king. Be your own paymaster."

The harpist cried, "But didn't I sing sweetly?"

The king answered, "So much the worse for your pride that you should dedicate such talent on yourself. Go away; you shall not serve in my court again."

Jesus said, "You say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" ([Revelation 3:17 NKJV](#)). How relevant His parable of the Pharisee and publican is for you and me today in the end-times. We must be careful. Arrogance and an unwillingness to admit we need salvation will be a chronic problem in the final age of the church.

On the other hand, it is those who come to God recognizing their spiritual poverty who find acceptance and forgiveness and eternal life. "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" ([Matthew 5:3](#)). May this Scripture be planted deep in our hearts, lest we leave our lives unforgiven—while the humble leave their lives with eternal life.