MISPLACED CONFIDENCE v. TRUE FAITH

On Pharisee and the Publican, the vital difference between them, and what it says to us about saving faith

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt…” LUKE 18:9 (ESV)

At times Jesus taught multitudes with his parables. At other times he employed parables to teach his disciples. But in today’s Gospel reading the audience to whom Jesus directed a parable was a group of people who were guilty of two sins: (1) trusting in themselves and their own righteousness, (2) and treating others with contempt.

The group Jesus targeted was most certainly a gaggle of Pharisees that had come within range of his voice. (The reason I say this is that bad guy in the parable is a Pharisee.) A sect of better-than-thou Jews, the Pharisees thought highly of themselves and poorly of others. Jesus’ words were aimed at putting them in their place, at giving them their comeuppance (as my grandparents’ generation might have put it.)

We all know people like the Pharisees, religious snobs who think highly of themselves and look down on others. Some of us used to be people like that! (God forbid, some of us may still be like that.) So it’s not hard for us to imagine the kind of people the Lord gave this tongue lashing to.

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But this parable accomplishes far more than putting a group of religious snobs in their place. It also serves to teach us the difference between misplaced human confidence and true faith. The former leads to condemnation, the latter to right standing with God. It is the difference between misplaced human confidence and true faith that I want to focus on in this sermon.

I. THE PARABLE

The parable itself is a short one, and features two actors. Each actor plays his role within the temple complex, so both are Jews and both know the law. Both also know that God may be addressed in prayer and worship, and come to the temple to do so.

But how different these two actors are.

The Pharisee

The Pharisee stood and prayed as follows, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax-collector” (v. 11). Then he adds, “I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I possess” (v. 12). While it’s certainly commendable that the Pharisee is unlike the list of bad characters he mentions, and also that he fasts and give tithes, his self-assured boasting pollutes his prayer. In fact, his self-assured boasting is not prayer at all. It’s a self-honoring exercise in prideful boasting that reminds us of the first line of the prophet Habakkuk’s famous passage,

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\text{Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith} \ (\text{Hab. 2:4}).
\]
The Pharisee is in the place of mercy (the temple), but he perceives no need for mercy or forgiveness. He’s too full of himself to perceive his emptiness.

**The tax collector**

The tax collector (publican) is of a completely different mind, however. A Jew who earned his living as a tax collector for the despised Roman Empire, he made a very good living. But his profession was notorious for dishonest dealings. Publicans (tax collectors) were thus outcasts in Jewish society. Unlike the Pharisee, however, the publican had come to realize how sinful he was. For that reason he went to the temple, which was the place of divine reconciliation under Jewish law.

Jesus says this of him, “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ ” (v. 13). With nothing to boast of and with a great deal to be ashamed of, the tax collector prays a heartrending appeal for divine mercy. He knows what he is. He is a sinner. He knows what he needs. He needs mercy and forgiveness.

**The contrast**

The contrast between the Pharisee and the publican is profound. One is self-assured before God, has no awareness of his sin, and seeks nothing from God but an audience to listen to his boasting. The other is aware of his sin, is broken before God, and seeks God’s mercies.

**The lessons**

The Lord states the lesson of the parable succinctly. “I tell you,” he states, “this man went down to his house justified
rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14).

The repentant publican had no confidence in himself or his deeds. But he had faith, and with that faith he appealed to God for mercy. At that, God forgave him his sins, ruled in his favor, and acquitted him. The publican left the temple justified. The boastful Pharisee, however, had much pride and no faith. He left the temple condemned.

Jesus summed up the lessons of this parable by stating that those who exalt themselves before God will be abased, and those who humble themselves before God will be exalted. The parable indictsa the arrogant Pharisees but offers hope to humble sinners. The arrogant will be brought down. But the sinner, if he humbles himself before God, confesses his sin, and appeals for mercy, in faith, will be lifted up.

II. APPLICATIONS

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican is one of the more famous of the Lord’s parables, and its numerous lessons may be applied in a number ways. What I would like to do now is address three issues that arise from this parable in an effort to apply them to our own time and reality.

The stage: the Jewish temple

The staging of this parable is of enormous importance to our understanding of its lessons, as I will now try to explain. The temple was the place where the morning and evening sacrifices of the lamb assured God’s presence among His people. It was the place where the sins of the repentant were forgiven on the basis of God-prescribed sacrifices and rites. (The sacrifices of animals were many and bloody, and great numbers of buzzards
soared over the temple because of them.) The temple was the place where the penitent could offer prayers in full assurance of God’s gracious pardon. So symbolically, everything about the temple shouted Man’s Sin and God’s Mercy. The temple was not, therefore, a place for human boasting. It was instead a place where the penitent enjoyed humble access to the merciful true God.

The Jewish temple no longer exists. Nor will it ever exist again as an instrument of God’s redemption and favor.¹ In the New Covenant dispensation, the gospel of Christ reveals man’s sin and God’s mercy. So also do the Christians and churches that genuinely embrace and preach the gospel. The genuine gospel preaches and teaches the cross of Christ Jesus in fullness. For it is there, on the cross in the finished sacrifice and Christ Jesus, that both man’s sins and God’s mercies are fully revealed.

Our contemporary problem, however, is that a less-than-complete gospel is too often preached. And the less-than-complete gospel tends to either fail to show man his sin, or fails to show man God’s mercies. In other words, the false gospel either (1) offers a sinner God’s mercies without showing him his sin, or (2) it shows the sinner his sin without showing him God’s mercies. The first preaches a false mercy, the other a false condemnation.

Many of the emerging and user-friendly churches that dot the Evangelical landscape today are guilty of the first error. That

¹ There are contemporary voices that speak in favor of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Political realities work against such a project at this time. But even if the temple were to be rebuilt, it would be of no service to the Christian peoples (Jew and Gentile) because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is all the sacrifice that believers will ever need. Furthermore, renewed Jewish sacrifices in a rebuilt temple will accomplish nothing for Jews, whose only hope for salvation is in Christ Jesus and his already accomplished redemptive sacrifice.
is, they offer mercy to people without first convincing them that they are sinners. Many of the old-line Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches are guilty of the latter error. That is, they condemn sin and sinners but fail to lead the condemned to the mercies of God. The gospel (and church) of false mercy doles out morphine that benumbs sinners on their journey to hell, and the gospel (and church) of a graceless gospel augments misery and guilt without offering remedy.

On the other hand, the true gospel (and church) exposes the sinner’s sin, awakens in him a just and most necessary guilt, leads him to repentance, points him to the mercies of God, and gives him faith to seek and obtain God’s forgiveness.

The setting of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector insists on the full and genuine gospel of God, a gospel that reveals both man’s sin and God’s mercies. So let us ask ourselves: Does our gospel and church do justice to the gospel? Or is our gospel and church less an expression of grace than the Old Covenant temple was?

The Pharisee

The Pharisee totally misread the purpose and reality of the Jewish temple. He was blind to its grace. With no awareness of either his sin or his need for God’s mercies, he offered neither prayer nor praise in the temple. What he offered was proud and empty boasting. Spurgeon said of this proud man, “It was the fault of the Pharisee that though he went up into the Temple to pray, he did not pray. There is no prayer in all that he said.”

The Pharisee of the parable has his descendants in our day. They populate seminaries, churches, and Christian families. They are right in their own eyes, arrogant before God and man, and critical of others. With such people, self-righteous smugness replaces true praise, and their prideful condescension offers false
kindnesses. Such people sever the unity of the Church, and by them the gospel is defamed and imprisoned.

The *Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* warns us to *not* be Pharisees; it exposes Pharisees for what they are; and it establishes the Lord’s censure on all who conduct themselves as the Pharisee did. It also says this: The man who doesn’t know his sin is also ignorant of his need for mercy. Such men will never be justified in God’s sight.

**The tax collector**

The tax collector knew his sin. He was broken hearted about it. But it was grace that revealed his sin to him, for it drew him to the place of mercy and forgiveness and redemption. Spurgeon says of this man, “It is one excellence of the publican that he went up to the Temple to pray and he did pray—there is nothing but prayer in all that he said. ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ is a pure, unadulterated prayer.” The publican knew what the temple was all about. He understood why the buzzards circled overhead. He knew what the temple sacrifices and rites were for. He thoroughly understood his sin, and he knew he needed to go to the temple to deal with it, and how he needed to pray when he got there. He knew he needed to confess his sin and beseech God for pardon. And he knew God was merciful. So with the true faith that reveals a man’s sin to him, and at the same time reveals God’s mercies, the humbled sinner made his humble plea. And he returned to his house justified.

The *Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* puts the full operation of grace on display. Only grace can show a man his sin and give him hope to obtain God’s tender mercies. Only grace can lead a sinner to God for the purpose of confessing his sin, appealing for mercy, and obtaining pardon and right standing (justification).
True grace reveals sin *and* extends mercy. This parable teaches the grace of the true gospel.

**CONCLUSION**

My brethren, I say with sadness that there is not enough of the true gospel being preached in our day. But let us pray for God to equip us to fully and adequately and effectively communicate the grace of the gospel to all we can. And let us pray that many a publican who hears us will, in response to the gospel, come running to our merciful God to both confess his sins and plea for mercy. The House that God builds is built by grace. May we be messengers of that grace. *Amen.*