

## INTRODUCTION

A man with three sons inherited a little over \$1 billion dollars. Since he now had all this money, he offered to buy his sons anything they wanted. He stressed *money was no object*. His first son said he had always wanted a Jaguar, so his father bought him seven Jaguars in different colors, so he would have a different one to drive every day of the week. His second son wanted a motorcycle. So the father went out and bought him 30 new motorcycles, so he would have a different bike to ride every day of the month. His youngest was only 8, and he said he wanted a Mickey Mouse outfit. So his father went out and bought him the Dallas Cowboys.

Sadly, too many Christians have a Mickey Mouse prayer life. In the first eight verses of Luke 18, Jesus taught about the importance of praying persistently. Beginning in verse 9, he tells another parable about prayer.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

I tell you this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

In Jesus' time, the Pharisee would have been considered the good guy—he wore the white hat. He was a synagogue leader in his town. All Pharisees were super-religious men who were extremely careful about obeying the Torah, which is basically the first five books of the Old Testament. They also followed the Mishnah, which explained how to obey the Torah. There might be several chapters in the Mishnah devoted to one single verse in the Torah. In addition, they followed the Talmud, which was a commentary on the Mishnah. These guys lived by the book!

However, a tax collector was considered the scum of the earth, the very bottom of the religious food chain in Israel. Hired by the pagan Romans, he could charge exorbitant taxes and keep most of the money for himself. He was considered the villain—he wore the black hat. If you had been a good Jew listening to Jesus, when he mentioned the Pharisee, you would have cheered, "Yeah! Hurrah for the good guy!" When He mentioned the tax collector you would have cried, "Boo! Hiss! Boo!" But Jesus is always full of surprises. He introduced a good guy and a bad guy, and by the time He finished the parable, the good guy had become the bad guy and the bad guy has become the good guy!

In case you still don't get the picture, I've written a modern paraphrase of this parable. Having Eugene Petersen here this past week inspired me. Dr. Peterson's paraphrase is *The Message*, but some of you will probably just call mine *The Mess*, because you may not like it very much. I call it "The Parable of the Deacon and the Drug Pusher."

### *The Parable of the Deacon and the Drug Pusher*

As Baptist Bob walked into church one Sunday morning, he was disgusted to see Larry Lowlife there, for Larry was a drug pusher who had 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. There were times, O Lord, when I was sick, but I came anyway. And Father, thou knowest I used to sing in the choir, until I was persecuted by the song leader who wouldn't sing my style of music—but I can endure persecution just like Thou didest. 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, and I don't cuss on Sundays, and I don't smoke unfiltered cigarettes and I don't use drugs or sell them—like someone who is among today. Lord, we need more people just like me in our church. And, Lord, help everyone to come out tomorrow night at 7 p.m. at Oak Park field to watch our church softball team beat the Methodists again and 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 are like dirt compared to God's purity, He'll pick you up and clean you up.

Are you more like Bob or Larry in that story? As we study these words of Jesus, I encourage you to answer three important questions:

#### **I. WHY DID YOU COME TO CHURCH?**

In the parable, both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector went to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. But when you examine their actions and attitudes, you discover they went for two different reasons. Why did you come today?

##### **1. To be seen?**

Obviously, the Pharisee was at the temple for others to see how good he was. To him it was a public performance and his behavior at the temple was just part of the script. He had given much thought about what he would wear, and where he would stand, and what he would say, because there was an audience. When he arrived, he walked up to the front and stood before the people in his flowing robe with the ornate prayer shawl the Pharisees wore. It just all part of the religious show for him. The words he prayed were not really directed toward God. He prayed to *himself*. He was there to be seen and to be heard by the other worshipers. Jesus warned about 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."

When you are preparing to come to church, are you thinking more about who will be there to see you than you are about connecting with God? Do you choose what you're going to wear based on what other people will think about you? I know you can't believe it, but some people actually come to church because they think it will help them in their business, or in politics, or will improve their social standing. Answer honestly: Why do you attend church?

We all struggle with the temptation of trying to please other people rather than pleasing God. Even during our prayer time here, I constantly try to focus on just speaking to God rather than using prayer as another sermon for you to hear. I'm often asked to lead in prayer at public functions away from the church as well. Actually, I don't get asked as much as I used to because most people have learned I am going to pray in the name of Jesus and that is not politically correct in our culture. But when I am asked to pray, I sincerely try to simply talk to God rather than to deliver some kind of cute sermonette in my prayer. We must all guard against praying so others will be impressed with what we say. Prayer should always be directed to God alone.

There was a little boy who was kneeling by his bed with his mom to say his nighttime prayers. He began to shout to the top of his lungs, "Dear God, I've been real good this year so please let me get a new bicycle for my birthday." His mom said, "Son, God is not deaf; you don't need to yell." He said, "God's not deaf, but Grandma is and she's in the next room."

The tax collector represents another reason you might be here today. Did you come

## **2. To seek God?**

The tax collector showed up because he was in trouble and he believed God could help him. His body language revealed his sense of unworthiness; he couldn't walk to the front of the crowd, instead he kept his distance. He didn't focus on the other people there, he focused on God.

Worship does involve an audience. But it's an audience of one. When we come to church, we should be primarily concerned about seeking God's face. You may receive the applause of man, but you should be deaf to it. You should be listening only for the applause of the nail-scarred hands.

Why are you here today? Is it just your habit, a part of your weekend routine? Perhaps you came because your parents or your spouse pressured you to come. Or maybe you feel guilty if you don't come. Or did you come seeking to connect with the Almighty God, the Creator of the

Universe? God says in Jeremiah 29:13, “‘You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.’ declares the Lord.”

Some people may come seeking God, but our half-hearted worship becomes a hindrance to them. I recently read a letter sent to me by a pastor from another state, it was written by a teenager. Her words have haunted me. She wrote to one of her friends:

“Dear Kathy, I attended your church yesterday. Although you had invited me, you were not there, so I sat alone. After sitting down, a lady came up and informed me that I was in her seat. I was so embarrassed because I didn’t know some seats were reserved. Finally I climbed over some people hugging the aisle and found another seat. During the singing, I was surprised to note that some of the church people weren’t singing at all. Instead, they looked around or just stared into space. The pastor’s speech was interesting, although some members didn’t seem to think so. They looked bored and restless. I recognized some of my classmates a few pews in front of me, but they were giggling and passing notes. I thought, “How rude!”

The speaker talked about the reality of faith, which I decided I didn’t have enough of. The message really got to me and I thought about walking forward, but I was unsure. I saw some people walking out before the service was over, so I figured it must not be too important to stay to the end, so I slipped out too. As I left I said good morning to one couple, but they were in a hurry and must not have heard me. My parents don’t go to church. I came alone yesterday hoping to find a place to truly worship and find some love. I’m sorry, but I didn’t find it in your church.”

When I read that letter, I literally got on my knees and said, “Please God, don’t let that be the impression people get when they come here!”

The next question I’d like for you to answer is:

## **II. WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE IN CHURCH?**

In the parable Jesus showed two totally different attitudes people can display in worship. The Pharisee presented an attitude that said

### **1. I’m proud of my goodness**

In some instances, pride can be good. It is okay to say you are proud to be an American, or that you take pride in your neighborhood. But the Bible warns against the dangerous kind of pride characterized by self-love, egotism, and arrogance. This kind of pride is revealed in the prayer of the Pharisee. He wanted others to know about his goodness, so he bragged that he fasted, tithed, and kept all the commandments. Here’s how you can recognize if you have pride in your heart:

#### **a. Pride loves to talk about “I”**

In verse 11 the Pharisee used "I" and "me" several times. He said, "I thank you that I am not like other men...I fast twice a week, and I give a tithe of all I get." Those are all good things to do. You should pray, you should fast, and you should tithe. But if you are doing it because you think it will get you into heaven, or make you appear to be a good person before others, those good things become dangerous.

The Bible says, "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18). According to Isaiah 14, once the devil was a beautiful angel named Lucifer. Pride filled his heart and he developed an "I" problem. He said, "I will ascend and make my throne with God, I will be like the most high, I'm going up!" But God said, "No, Lucifer, you're going down!" That's really what pride is, reflecting the ego of the devil. Here's an acrostic for you to remember what pride is: It is the **P**erverted **R**esult of **I**mitating the **D**evil's **E**go. Some people are the happiest when they can talk about themselves. That's often a marker that they have a problem with pride. Someone has said Pride is the only sickness everyone can recognize except the person who has it! God must get a little weary of listening to proud prayers full of "gimme gimme gimme." When some people pray it must sound like the lyrics to the country song by Toby Keith: "I wanna talk about me, I wanna talk about I; wanna talk about number one; oh my me my; What I think; what I like; what I know; what I want, what I see; I like talking about you, God, occasionally; but mostly, I wanna talk about me!"

All of us should have an occasional "I" exam. If you recorded your conversation and your prayers for 24 hours, how much of your talk would be centered on the big "I"?

### **b. Pride seldom admits a need**

Pride gives a person a false sense of self-sufficiency. Have you ever heard the expression, "I'm too proud to ask for help?" When you are too proud to ask for help or admit you have a problem, you are too proud—period! When you ask a proud person how you can pray for them, they will often say, "Oh, I'm alright. There's really nothing you need to pray for me about." They say that because they are too proud to admit they have a need. They fear if they tell you where they're hurting they'll lose their facade of perfection and goodness.

### **c. Pride sees the faults of others**

Did you notice the Pharisee was quick to criticize and condemn the tax collector? Pride blinds a person to their own faults and magnifies the failures and faults of others. When you compare yourself to someone else, you're using the wrong standard. God's measuring stick is not the goodness or badness of another person; His standard is Jesus—how do you measure up to Him? I've heard people justify their goodness by saying they have never robbed a bank or murdered someone. Sure, when you compare yourself to some serial murderer, you look like a moral hero. God doesn't grade on the curve. It doesn't matter if you are a little better than average what matters is if you have personal relationship with Jesus.

I once read a story in which a man described a house in Scotland that was painted white. The house stood out clean and brilliant against the dark green backdrop of the grass-covered hills. One day it snowed and the entire country side was transformed into a winter wonderland. When

the man looked at the cottage against the backdrop of the pure fallen snow, he noticed for the first time it was dingy and dirty. It was the same house, just a different backdrop. When you compare yourself to a rapist, you may appear to be morally clean, but when you stand up next to the purity of Jesus Christ, you see a different picture.

There was another attitude expressed in church. The tax collector displayed an attitude that said:

## **2. I desperately need God's mercy!**

He couldn't even lift up his head, he was so burdened. He pounded his fist on his chest, a spontaneous gesture of his agony over his sin. He uttered seven simple words with a voice broken with emotion: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." He literally said, "Be merciful to me, THE sinner," as if he considered himself the chief among all sinners. You don't have to pray a long, eloquent prayer full of religious words. If you pray a simple prayer that comes from your heart, God hears you and He will answer you.

When the tax collector caught a glimpse of the greatness and holiness of God, he realized how dirty and filthy he was. The Bible says, "All our righteousness is as filthy rags." (Isaiah 64:6) Even the good things we do are dirty compared to the stark, brilliant holiness of God. When you see God for Who He is—holy, then you will be able to see yourself for who you really are—a fallen creature in desperate need of God's mercy and forgiveness. That will humble you in a hurry.

I recall a great line from the movie "Rudy". Rudy was an undersized kid who dreamed of playing football for Notre Dame. In one scene he was talking to an old Catholic priest. The priest told Rudy, "After all these years, there are only two things I'm totally certain about: (1) There is a God; and (2) I'm not Him!"

Is that your attitude? Have you come to a place in your life where you know you can't make it another moment without God's mercy, peace, and forgiveness in your life?

C. S. Lewis wrote: "How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of God, but are all the time imagining how He thinks them far better than 'ordinary' people. They pay a penny-worth of imaginary humility to Him and get out of it a pound's worth of Pride towards their fellow-men (or woman)...The real test of being in the presence of God is, you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether."

The final question to answer is:

## **III. HOW WILL YOU GO HOME?**

In the parable, but Jesus said only one of the two men went home justified. "Justified" is a great Bible word meaning to be "right with God." The only way you can be right with God is to

receive His mercy and forgiveness. Whenever I read the word "justified" in the New Testament, I rejoice that God treats me "just-as-if-I'd" never sinned.

In verse 14 Jesus summarized the main principle of the parable: "He who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted. *The Message* paraphrase of verse 14 is, "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself." The world says, "Promote yourself, look out for #1." God says, "Humble yourself, seek Me first."

Just like in Jesus' parable, you'll go home today basically in one of two conditions.

You may go home

### **1. Unchanged-Religious and proud of it!**

The Pharisee was so committed to his religious observance that he could be proud by his performance. So he went home unchanged. Thousands of people attend church Sunday after Sunday, but they leave exactly the way they come in. To them, religious observance is something they DO, so they can be proud about their conduct. God addressed the problem of superficial religion in Isaiah 29:13. The Lord says, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."

The problem with Jewish religion, Roman Catholic religion, Baptist religion, or Buddhist religion is it is primarily concerned with outward performance rather than inward purity. Jesus criticized the Pharisees by saying they clean the outside of the cup, but the inside was filthy. He said they were like whitewashed tombs, shiny and clean on the outside, but on the inside, they were filled with rotteness. (Matthew 23:25-28) Religion cleans you up on the outside, but only Jesus can clean you up on the inside.

Having religion may give you a little more respectability in your business or in your community, but if you aren't careful, religion can make you so proud you may miss heaven. Dr. Ray Pritchard wrote some powerful words: Without a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, religion leads you to Hell while making you think you are going to Heaven.

I hope you go home today the same way the tax collector did:

### **2. Unburdened-Right with God and thankful for it!**

Jesus said the bad guy, not the respectable, religious Pharisee went home justified-right with God. He entered church so burdened down by his sin he couldn't even lift up his head. But when he cried out for the mercy of God, he experienced the liberation of forgiveness. He hadn't done anything to deserve it, so he couldn't brag about it. All he could do was to thank God for it!

Maybe you are here today and you feel a little out of place because you aren't really a religious person. In fact, you have done some dumb things and messed up your life in a big way.

Congratulations! Like the tax collector, you are the best candidate for salvation! The hardest people to be saved are those religious people who think their goodness makes them VIPs with God. The easiest person to be saved is the one who will admit to God that he has sinned royally and has to have his mercy, or he is a goner.

## CONCLUSION

You must approach God in humility if you want to receive His forgiveness. You can't strut into His presence bragging about how nice you are. In Bethlehem, The Church of the Holy Nativity is built over the place believed to be Jesus' birthplace. It is a huge stone complex, but it only has one tiny door through which people can enter. It's called the door of humility and it is less than 48" high. Originally, there was a larger door, but when the Muslims first conquered Bethlehem, the soldiers rode their horses into the church to defile it. So the monks reduced the size of the door so only a person can enter. And every person must stoop and bow and enter alone. What a lesson! The doorway of salvation is open to you today, but it is a door of humility as well. You can't approach God on the basis of your parents' salvation—you must do it alone. And to receive His mercy and forgiveness you must humble yourself and bow down before Him.

Would you like to find God's mercy and cleansing? Will you humble yourself and admit you are a sinner? 3,000 years ago, another man needed God's cleansing and forgiveness. Even though he was a good, religious guy, he made a huge mistake. He was guilty of adultery and murder. If you need mercy, try praying the same prayer King David prayed in Psalm 51:1-2: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me."

## OUTLINE

### I. WHY DID YOU COME TO CHURCH?

#### 1. To be seen?

"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." *Matthew 6:5*

#### 2. To seek God?

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you." declares the Lord. *Jeremiah 29:13*

### II. WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE IN CHURCH?

#### 1. I'm proud of my goodness

PRIDE:

1. Loves to talk about "I"
2. Seldom admits a need
3. Sees the faults of others

#### 2. I desperately need God's mercy!

### III. HOW WIL YOU GO HOME?

#### 1. Unchanged-Religious and proud of it!

The Lord says, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." *Isaiah 29:13*

#### 2. Unburdened-Right with God and thankful for it!

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. *Psalms 51:1-2*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes