

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/23/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, October 23rd

Luke 18:9-14

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Thank God I am not like them

This week's Gospel lection is Luke's second parable about prayer as Jesus approaches the end of His journey to Jerusalem. This is another parable unique to Luke. Following on from last week's Gospel lection where Jesus uses the Parable of the Persistent Widow to teach His disciples about always praying and never losing hope, this week's lection features the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (or Publican) which emphasizes the attitude of humility in which we should approach prayer. This parable challenges us to ask ourselves, are my prayers more like those of the Pharisee or those of the tax collector? Going deeper, on what or whom do I place my trust: personal piety, legalistic works, radical zeal for redefining the kingdom or just the grace and mercy of God?

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:*

Previous to this parable, Jesus was addressing His disciples (17:22). Jesus appears to be addressing this week's parable to the Pharisees. Like the previous parable, Luke provides the intended interpretation up front.

¹⁰ *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

Two contrasting individuals go up to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, a sect known for their piety, the other a tax collector, a hated subcontractor to the Romans known for their corruption. The tax collector would have been a social and religious outcast (cf. Matthew 18:17).

¹¹ *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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'*

The Pharisee refers to God only once but himself five times! As Plummer states, "He glances at God but sees only himself"¹ and as Barclay puts it, "He prayed with himself."² Perhaps the New American Standard Bible has the best rendering when it stated the Pharisee was "praying to himself." This is really a self-testimonial. First, he identifies some of the vices from which he refrains and lists his pious practices. The Day of Atonement was the

¹ L. Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 282.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 223.

only day in which the Law required obligatory fasting. However, human interpretation gave "extra credit" to anyone willing to fast on Mondays and Thursdays. These were also market days which gave such pious individuals the opportunity to show off their piety (by whitening their faces and wearing disheveled clothes) to the maximum audience. The Law required certain crops to be tithed (Deuteronomy 14:22) but a Pharisaic practice was to tithe even garden herbs (see Luke 11:42). The Pharisee again went beyond the Law's requirement. Everything the Pharisee said was in fact true.

¹³ 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!'

The tax collector, on the other hand, approaches God with a humble and contrite heart. He cannot even look up. He beats his breast (an outward sign of his repentance, see Luke 23:48). The tax collector does not attempt to justify his sins or even ask for forgiveness; he asks only for mercy. Asking for mercy is a recognition that the tax collector accepts that punishment is deserved.

¹⁴ 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."

Jesus is very clear here. The tax collector is the one who is declared righteous. The Pharisee is merely self-righteous. The final sentence illustrates the key principle, the same principle brought out at the Parable of the Wedding Feast (Luke 14:11): "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

Reflections

The difficulty with this parable is that the reader almost falls into the behavior that this parable teaches us to avoid! "God, I thank you that I am not like this self-righteous Pharisee!" The Pharisee judges others by His own standard ("*...thank you that I am not like other men...*") and looks down on the miserable tax collector. By their tradition, the Pharisee would be made unclean by merely being in the presence of the tax collector. Yet how often is this same mindset present in our churches?

The historical role of an usher, for instance, included keeping out the riffraff likely to disrupt a service. At one end of the spectrum, we still find the ongoing piety contests and legalistic hurdles that can often drive people away. "Thank God we are not like the 'great unwashed' or like those apostates! We must keep them out of our church and off our campuses."

At the other end of the legalism-license spectrum, there are churches attempting to out-compete each other for who represents the most progressive by defining additional groups to add to the Beatitudes and welcoming ever-new categories of neighbor. "Thank God that we are compassionate, tolerant and inclusive, not like those heartless bigots!" Unlike the tax collector in this parable, these modern tax collectors do not consider themselves sinners and thus anything which contradicts with their view of themselves must be discarded, including Scripture.

All hyperbole aside, there is still much tendency to define Christ in our own image and rest on our own understanding and works. There are many ways we can represent the Pharisee of this parable but still only one way to represent the tax collector: as a humble, repentant sinner throwing himself on the mercy of God through fully trusting the work and person of Christ.