

“Do This, Don’t Do That”

Luke’s Special Parables: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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In the same way that the parable of the creditor and the debtors was directed to a self-righteous Pharisee, this parable is also directed at others like him. One after another of these parables continue to build a case against Jesus. He just kept on confronting them over time until they couldn’t take the opposition anymore. It was bound to happen. Powerful Jews were able to convince secular authorities that Jesus was a blasphemer that maliciously stirred up the Galilean Jews.

When you read this scripture with me you pick up on that quickly. He addressed the parable to “some” (more than one) who were “confident of their own righteousness.” (NIV). What sets this apart in some way is that Jesus contrasts two kinds of people that were well known in their society. Especially, one was the image of a Pharisee that Jesus presented to them as a poor example. The other example was the tax collector. His conclusion was that the tax collector, a *persona non grata* in their society represented the “do this” idea in the story. The Pharisee, then represented the “don’t do that.”

To get into the background of this parable we must remember that Luke tells us in 5:7, that he had not come to call righteous but sinners to repentance. In 7:34, Luke points out that Jesus’s opponents had ridiculed him as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners.” Then, there is that oft-quoted statement of Jesus in the story of the Lost Sheep when he says that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”¹

Another important point about the background of this parable is that the conclusion about humility and status in the kingdom had already appeared verbatim in Luke 14. In another setting Jesus attended a banquet where there were guests who were choosing places of honor. He encouraged the people attending not to sit down at the special places set up in front but go to the less prominent seating. Indeed, the honor would be if the host came over and asked a person to come sit with him in a higher position. You can find the saying in Matthew 23:12, too, where Jesus talked about servanthood to both the crowds and the disciples. In the same words that we find here at the conclusion of the Pharisee and the Tax

¹ NIB, IX, R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” 342.

Collector, Jesus said, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (14:11) As my seminary professor Dr. Alan Culpepper, said in his commentary, “The Pharisee had enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be humble.” His deduction was that the parable was in some ways two sided: “the nature of grace is paradoxical, he said, it can be received only by those who have learned empathy for others.” Only the merciful can receive mercy, and only those who forgive will be forgiven.” By his own attitude of doing “right things” he missed out on the new kingdom idea that grace, mercy, and forgiveness would be the new standards of acceptance in the community of his disciples. So, the parable is not just about a warning against pride, self-sufficiency, or a relationship with God based on one’s own works. You have to be careful or you will miss the other side of the parable.²

Last week, I mentioned the well-known Bible teacher Eta Linnemann. She thinks that we rush to judgement about the Pharisee since Jesus depicts him as someone who was seriously attempting to do what was right in the sight of God. To those first listeners, he was an “ideal pious man,” whom everyone would have agreed upon hearing the first part of parable was an example of what people in a faith relationship ought to do. They would say, in the words of Linnemann, “Yes, that is what one should be like!” Unlike us, they had not yet heard the rest of Jesus’s parable. She goes on to say, that the Pharisee not only avoided transgressions of the law and fulfilled more than his obligations, but he gives God the praise as well—so it seems—and treats it all as a gift!” In the listeners ears, the [Pharisee] whom Jesus described could be thought of as “a man after God’s heart.”³ Moreover, the Pharisee in the parable does not ask God for anything. That alone speaks to his self-sufficiency before God. In every way, the listeners would have been glowing that they knew as well as should the Rabbi Jesus that the Pharisee was indeed a righteous man.

So, you can imagine the shock and awe effect of the parable when Jesus compared the position of the Pharisee with a tax-collector. Linnemann describes their place in society very well and the description is worth a reading. At the very least she points out that those who were listening to the parable would see a tax collector as one who would not be someone who could easily be forgiven—very nearly impossible.

You see, that is the point of the parable. The New Age of God’s kingdom is not about a righteousness that is humanly achievable, but about grace, mercy, and

² Ibid., 343.

³ Linneman, *Parables of Jesus*, 58-60.

love. The new kingdom was a major shift away from seeking God's approval for living rightly as defined by first century Jewish law but about acknowledging God's mercy and grace for a sinful defect in our humanity.

If we had been there that day, I would have been embarrassed that I was not anywhere close to being like the Pharisee. I would have stood there in silence lest anyone should judge me for my failure to be like the super hero Jesus described. What if, standing in the group, there were thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even a tax collector? What, if standing in the group were very religious people who did not fast twice a week, or give a tenth of all their income? It is likely that no one in the group to whom Jesus told the parable measured up to the high accomplishment of the Pharisee in their personal faith. Up until the time Jesus told this parable who could be righteous was clearly epitomized in the life of someone like the Pharisee. This being a parable, perhaps not even a single Jew had measured up to that level. But, if there were one, it would have been someone who practiced his or her life of faith just like that unnamed Pharisee role model. But, wait! Jesus destroyed the notion of that kind of piety in a heartbeat. It was an argument that only had one conclusion..

The question to the audience was “can the Pharisee and the tax collector both be righteous then?”⁴ You can understand, now, why Jesus's lesson was difficult to accept. If, the Pharisee did all those righteous things and yet have been judged unrighteous, while the tax-collector just wanted forgiveness with no evidence of reparations as required by Jewish law could be judged righteous then the whole understanding of how people relate to God was thrown into chaos! We, too, are confused, aren't we? “[I]s the godless to be counted as the righteous man, and the righteous man as the godless?”⁵ In the words of the Bible scholar Joachim Jeremias, “It was beyond the capacity of any of them to imagine.”⁶ It is difficult for us, too. You see the point, don't you? Jesus created a character for his story in which a Pharisee's religion “drove him away from the tax collector rather than to him.”⁷

When you keep studying this passage, you realize that Jesus uses a quotation from the Psalms that he puts into the words of the tax-collector. And, it is an ancient prayer, attributed to David when the prophet Nathan called him to task about his relationship to Bethsheba. The Psalm spells it out in no uncertain terms.

⁴ Linneman, 61-63. See a discussion of this in Linnemann's interpretation on “The Effect of the Contrast on the Audience.”

⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁶ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, Second Revised Edition, 144.

⁷ Culpepper, 343.

“Do this, don’t do that.” Amazingly, the Psalm begins with the same prayer of the tax collector. Psalm 51, in its entirety, makes the case that God does not delight in human approaches to God with actions like burnt offerings. David declared, “if I were to give you a burnt offering, you [God] would not be pleased.” (16) He continues, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (17) In humility the only choice we have is to come to God, miserable of our sin before God, recognizing that we are pitiful sinners, and broken hearted about it. Then, because of that humility God’s mercy is limitless.⁸

As was true for David, whose sin was ever before him, so we, too, live our lives aware of shadows of our existence. Our sins are innumerable. They often cry out to us from the dark places in our minds or climb out of somewhere in our minds to peer over the edge of the abyss of wrongful attitudes, prejudices, and arrogance. Sometimes we think about how we might make reparations for the wrongs we have done but quickly recognize that we do not have the wherewithal to make up for what we have done. We know there are no do-overs.

⁸ See Jeremias’s discussion of this on “God’s Mercy for Sinners,” 145.