

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18.9-14)

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Keywords

Christianity, practices and traditions, values and issues, prayer, hypocrisy, appearance vs reality, repentance, true godliness

Notes for teachers

Here is a story about a human situation we can all relate to. Most of us can recognise when someone acts as if they think they are more important than others; and when someone acts as if they don't think they are very important at all. Perhaps we have all acted in, or at least felt, the same way as both of these characters at different times. Jesus's story is firmly set in the world of his time, both in terms of place and in terms of attitudes to people belonging to specific, identifiable groups. Knowing something about how his hearers would have reacted to these groups helps us to recover something of the unexpected about this story. Something about appearances and reality which we perhaps miss if we have different expectations about Pharisees and tax collectors (or no expectations at all).

Who were the Pharisees?

Pharisees were a group of Jews who were well respected at the time of Jesus for the way they tried to live strictly according to the Law. Their concerns were not overtly political but rather they sought to preserve and live out the religious duties represented in the Law. To read more about the aims of this group, Deuteronomy 26 (especially verses 16-19) offers a helpful picture: commitment to God is indicated by choosing to give a tenth of your crops to the temple, caring for the needs of the poor, and keeping all the laws God has handed down. The choice to live this way is part of the covenant, or promised relationship, between God and his people. It is a response to the blessings God has given and will give to those who demonstrate their commitment to him.

Luke's Gospel was written late in the first century for followers of Jesus who were most likely far from Jerusalem and the temple (and indeed, the temple had most

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likely been destroyed by the Romans by the time Luke was writing). In this Gospel, the Pharisees are presented in a rather different and distinct way. Often they are shown to be unreceptive towards Jesus and his message, grumbling about what he has to say and unwilling to accept him in the way that others do. Stories such as the healing of the paralysed man in Luke 5.17-26 and the calling of the tax-collector Levi in Luke 5. 27-32 make this clear. But we should notice that they are also presented as trying to help Jesus in Luke 13.31.

So, in terms of the story of Luke's Gospel, readers might be justified in being suspicious of the Pharisee in this parable. The way his long speech makes him seem perfect, compared to those around him, places him in the context of most other references in Luke's Gospel. But if this story represents something about the actual time of Jesus, those hearing it for the first time would likely be nodding their heads in approval at the way the Pharisee fasts conscientiously and tithes with gusto, choosing not to act in a way which went against God's laws. He is not so much a caricature, as a man who takes his faith very seriously.

Who were the tax collectors?

As this story indicates, tax collectors in the time of Jesus were Jewish people who had chosen to work with and for the Romans, who controlled the economic and political life of the nation. The Romans demanded tax on just about everything: land, crops, income, travel. They needed people on the ground to collect this money, and looked to local people to enforce their laws. It is quite possible that a tax collector such as the man in the story received no pay for his work, apart from the extra he could charge the people he was detailed to exact the taxes from.

Jesus' first hearers would not have been cheering for the tax collector. He worked for the faceless occupying force, and would have been considered not only to be a traitor, but a cheat too, getting rich at the expense of his own people.

In Luke's Gospel, however, tax collectors are given a special mention in several places. They seem to have been a group Jesus actively sought out to interact with, even eat and stay with. We saw this in the story of the calling of Levi in Luke 5.27-32. We see it in the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus- 19.1-10. In this Gospel, tax collectors are presented as ready to listen to Jesus, and open their lives and their homes to him. They find salvation while others are not singled out for such special treatment.

So, in this story, there are several levels of meaning we might want to consider. The understanding that Jesus' first hearers might have brought to the parable; the way the reader of Luke would approach the story; and our own experiences, both of feeling important and superior AND of feeling small and insignificant.

Of course, Jesus was not the only person to tell stories about this contrast. In one of Aesop's Fables there is a story about a man who prays, "Lord God, look thou with favour upon me and my wife and children and upon no-one else". Another man overhears and prays, "Lord God, Almighty God, confound that fellow and his wife and his children and nobody else".

What is different in Jesus' parable is that, at least to his first hearers, there is a surprise ending which we don't get in Aesop's Fable. It turns out the story is about an individual's relationship with God, at least in Jesus' interpretation of it as storyteller. And the person who has the better relationship with God is the one you would least expect. Not the person who apparently does his best to keep God's laws and live an acceptable life. Rather, it is the one who has made choices which suggest he does not always put God and his people first, but is willing to admit his mistakes. The story plays with appearance and a deeper reality, available through the perspective of the hero of Gospel, Jesus the storyteller.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why did Jesus tell this story?

What does the Pharisee do and say which gets him into trouble with Jesus?

What does the tax collector do (or not do) which Jesus seems to approve of?

The tax collector obeys some aspects of the religious law, but are there other laws in the Bible which he does not seem to follow?

What might it mean to be in the right with God?

Application to other contexts

Is it always right to be humble?

Is it never right to judge others?

Have there been times when you felt you were right and someone else was wrong, and you wanted to make sure the other person knew it? Or when you felt that your views didn't matter, or you held back because you were worried about getting things wrong? How did you resolve the situation?

If you were retelling this story to your friends, what would you change and what would you keep the same so they got something of the original message? How would you keep a sense of surprise, which Jesus' telling of the story involved?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

What does this story tell us about the way Jesus and his followers thought about their relationship with God? And about prayer?

How might this story affect the behaviour and attitudes of people today who are Christians?

Does the story have a more universal message, with something to say to people of other faiths or none?

Sources / Further Reading

The Aesop's Fable is found in Babrius, Phaedrus, *Fables*, (translated by Ben Edwin Perry; Loeb Classical Library 436. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), no. 666 in Perry's appendix, p 575.

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Jesus also told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else.

“Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, ‘I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, ‘God, have pity on me, a sinner!’”

“I tell you,” said Jesus, “the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great.”