

Luke 18:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

Analysis

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. This introduction to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector identifies the target audience and core issue Jesus addresses: self-righteousness and contempt for others. The Greek phrase "trusted in themselves" (pepoithotas eph' heautois, πεποιθότας ἐφ' ἑαυτοῖς) indicates confidence placed in one's own moral achievement rather than God's mercy.

"That they were righteous" (hoti eisin dikaioi, ὅτι εἰσὶν δίκαιοι) reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of righteousness. These individuals believed they had achieved covenant standing before God through their own religious performance and moral effort. The verb "despised" (exoutheneō, ἐξουθενέω) means to treat with contempt, consider as nothing, or utterly reject—revealing how self-righteousness inevitably produces pride and scorn toward those deemed morally inferior.

Jesus' diagnostic precision targets the Pharisaic system prevalent in first-century Judaism, though the condition transcends any particular religious context. Self-righteousness corrupts genuine faith by substituting human achievement for divine grace, personal merit for God's mercy. This mindset simultaneously elevates self and diminishes others, creating social and spiritual barriers. The parable that follows (verses 10-14) demonstrates that God's kingdom operates on completely

opposite principles: justification comes through humble dependence on divine mercy, not confident trust in personal righteousness.

Historical Context

This parable appears in Luke's extended journey narrative (9:51-19:27) as Jesus travels toward Jerusalem for His final Passover and crucifixion. Luke uniquely preserves this parable, fitting his theological emphasis on God's mercy toward the marginalized and his critique of religious pride.

First-century Palestinian Judaism featured intense debate about righteousness and covenant membership. The Pharisees, whose name means "separated ones," pursued meticulous observance of Torah and oral tradition to maintain covenant faithfulness. While their devotion was admirable in many respects, it frequently devolved into competitive religiosity and social stratification based on perceived holiness levels.

Tax collectors, by contrast, were considered traitors and sinners—collaborators with Rome who enriched themselves by collecting more than required. They were excommunicated from synagogue fellowship and considered beyond redemption by most religious Jews. Jesus' choice to contrast these two figures would have been shocking and offensive to His audience, directly challenging their assumptions about who stands justified before God. The parable's message anticipated the gospel's radical redefinition of righteousness as a gift received through faith rather than a status earned through works.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does self-righteousness subtly manifest in contemporary Christian life, ministry, or theological discussions?
2. In what ways do believers today "trust in themselves that they are righteous" rather than resting solely in Christ's righteousness?
3. How does the attitude of despising others reveal the presence of self-righteousness in our hearts?
4. What spiritual practices or theological frameworks help guard against the Pharisaic mindset Jesus critiques here?
5. How can the church cultivate genuine humility and dependence on grace while maintaining commitment to holiness and obedience?

Interlinear Text

Εἶπεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τινὰς τὴν πεποιθότας ἐφ' ἑαυτοῖς
he spake **And** **and** **unto** **certain** **which** **trusted** **in** **themselves**
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ὅτι εἰσὶν δίκαιοι καὶ ἐξουθενοῦντας τὴν λοιποὺς τὴν
that **they were** **righteous** **and** **despised** **which** **others** **which**
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παραβολὴν ταύτην·
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Additional Cross-References

Luke 16:15 (Righteousness): And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

Proverbs 30:12 (Parallel theme): There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness.

Isaiah 65:5 (Parallel theme): Which say, Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou. These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day.

Romans 10:3 (Righteousness): For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

Romans 14:10 (Parallel theme): But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Luke 7:39 (Parallel theme): Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

Romans 7:9 (Parallel theme): For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.

Luke 18:11 (Righteousness): The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

Luke 19:7 (Parallel theme): And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.