

The Pharisee and Publican

Prayer and Persistence · Parables of Jesus

Christ addressed this parable 'unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others' (Luke 18:9)—the Pharisaic party who found righteousness in legal observance and regarded publicans, sinners, and Gentiles with contempt. The parable demolishes self-righteousness while revealing that justification comes not through meritorious works but through humble acknowledgment of sin and desperate appeal to divine mercy. It exposes the fundamental contrast between religion rooted in human achievement and salvation grounded in God's grace.

Two men went up into the temple to pray: a Pharisee and a publican. The Pharisee 'stood and prayed thus with himself' (Luke 18:11)—whether meaning he prayed silently or that his prayer never rose higher than himself (being fundamentally self-directed rather than God-directed), the phrase suggests a prayer that was more self-congratulation than supplication. His prayer consisted entirely of comparison and enumeration of religious achievements: 'God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess' (Luke 18:11-12). He fasted beyond the law's requirement (only the Day of Atonement was mandatory), tithed meticulously even on garden herbs (Matthew 23:23), and avoided obvious sins. Yet his entire approach was fatally flawed: he compared himself to other men rather than to God's holiness, found security in external observance rather than heart transformation, and approached God as creditor to be paid rather than as sovereign to be worshiped.

Note: The publican's prayer—'God be merciful to me a sinner'—employs the Greek verb *hilaskomai*, meaning 'be propitiated' or 'be mercifully disposed through atonement.' The publican appealed to the

mercy seat (hilastērion) where the high priest sprinkled atoning blood on the Day of Atonement. He didn't ask God to overlook his sin but to accept substitutionary atonement. The Greek includes the definite article: literally 'the sinner'—not merely one among many but the sinner par excellence, acknowledging himself chief of sinners. This theological precision in a tax collector's prayer suggests these were likely Christ's own words, distilling justifying faith to its essence.

The publican, by contrast, 'standing afar off'—maintaining distance befitting his sense of unworthiness—'would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven'—unable to claim the bold access that characterizes those confident in their own righteousness—'but smote upon his breast'—a gesture of profound grief and contrition, striking the seat of sin and shame—'saying, God be merciful to me a sinner' (Luke 18:13). His prayer was brief, addressed entirely to God rather than self, made no comparison to others, claimed no merit, offered no works, brought no righteousness of his own, but cast himself wholly upon divine mercy. He acknowledged what the Pharisee denied: his absolute need for grace.

Christ's verdict reversed human judgment: 'I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other' (Luke 18:14). The despised publican, not the respected Pharisee, received justification—legal declaration of righteousness, not through his own works (for he claimed none) but through faith that cast itself upon God's mercy. The Pharisee's supposed righteousness was filthy rags; the publican's acknowledged sin, covered by atonement, was imputed righteousness. Christ concluded with the parable's governing principle: 'For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted' (Luke 18:14). God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Salvation belongs not to those who trust in their own righteousness but to those who, acknowledging their sin, cry out for mercy. This parable stands as perpetual rebuke to every form of self-

righteousness and perpetual comfort to every broken sinner who despairs of self but hopes in God.

Key Verses

Luke 18:9-10

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

Luke 18:11-12

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. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

Luke 18:13

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

Luke 18:14

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Isaiah 64:6

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Romans 3:23-24

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: