

Parable of the Pharisee and Publican (Luke 18:9-14)

“Who is Justified before God?”

Introduction

To stand justified on all issues of life is idealistic. To stand justified before a judge in the court of law is a great relief. This means that you are acquitted of any charge or, in the case of a private lawsuit, you have been found innocent. The plaintiff who brought you to court pays damages and costs to you. To be justified means “to be rendered just or righteous or innocent.”

If justification in the law courts of man can evoke such relief and gladness, how much more when a sinner finds himself justified when he stands before God. This is a matter of eternal life and eternal death. You and I cannot afford to treat this matter lightly or be unsure whether we will stand justified before God or not. The ones who stand before God not justified are therefore guilty. This means that they stand condemned before God. The punishment is hell and ultimately being sent to the Lake of Fire that burns for all eternity. There will be gnashing of teeth and great pain and intense torment from the flames of the Lake.

Christ gave this parable because of some who trusted in themselves. They presumed that they were righteous. They also despised others because they sincerely believed that they were righteous. Christ needed to “burst the bubble” of these people for their own good so that they would no longer live in delusion. Christ also gave this parable to His own disciples, as well as to those who were despised by these self-righteous men, to tell them that they also needed to ensure that they stand justified before God.

No one is exempt from this needful and urgent self-examination.

Elements of the Parable – The Pharisee refers to the self-righteous; The Publican refers to the repenting sinner; religious acts of the Pharisee refer to legalistic external good works.

Explaining the Parable – The purpose of the parable is to debunk self-righteousness that was prevalent among the Jews in Christ’s time. This is very true in our time today. The sin of self-righteousness is not only one of self-inflicted injury, but it attacks others who are not like them in their legalistic way to heaven. They become very judgmental to the point of despising them. The word “despise” means to keep on setting the person at naught. What others do is worthless and all that that they do is of absolutely no account. Nothing good can come out of anyone whose life is not like the self-righteous. They feel they are right all the time and others are wrong all the time. Such was the height of arrogance and self-righteousness in Christ’s time. The sad part is that many ordinary Jews look to these self-righteous legalistic bigots as godly men and as men who were half way to heaven! Christ had to teach rightly.

The scenario involved prayer. Two very different men went to pray at the same time and in the same place. One was highly exalted by society whereas the other was despised. One was a Pharisee and the other a publican, i.e. a tax collector. This particular kind of tax collectors obtained the right to collect taxes for the Roman government. They were given a lot of power to impose all kinds of taxation; no one wanted this hated task. They became very rich in the process. To maximize their effectiveness, they would farm out their tax collecting rights to others who would collect taxes from the Jews on their behalf. Zacchaeus was such a tax

collector. The Jews hated them for being traitors. The Jews also hated them for their abuse of taxation.

Jesus mentioned the Pharisee first. The Pharisee stood and prayed. He stood and prayed by himself, which probably means that he was thinking more about himself than God. What was foremost in his mind was who he was rather than who God is. "I am so worthy to stand before God on my own merits" was probably what was in his mind as he prayed. He thanked God that he was not like other men. Prayer is never about comparing with other men. However, to the self-righteous Pharisee, it was. Other men were extortioners, unjust and adulterers. This means that other men were cheats and lacked righteousness. They were immoral people. The Pharisee felt that he was definitely not like this publican who was standing nearby. He condemned the publican as he "prayed" loud enough for all to hear. The Pharisee's good deeds included fasting twice a week and giving tithes of all that he possessed. Fasting was to him an act of great sacrifice and piety. This declaration was to evoke some form of awe from the hearers, that here stood a pious man. The giving of his tithes pointed to a man of great generosity and religious devotion. He rendered to God what belonged to God. There was nothing wrong with fasting and tithing. There was also nothing wrong with not being like extortioners, the unjust and adulterers. What is very wrong with this Pharisee is his pride in these external legalisms, which he thought made him good enough to stand before the very presence of God in prayer!

The prayer of the publican was one of great humility. He stood afar off and dared not even go near the presence of God. He felt so ashamed and unworthy. He did not dare to lift his eyes to heaven. His head was down cast. He recognized his sinful state and unworthiness. He smote his breast as a sign of remorse and said, "God be merciful to me a sinner." There was no boasting. He felt so unworthy that he had to stand far from God. His prayer was a cry to God for mercy. It was enough before God's throne of grace.

God heard the publican's prayer and received him into His presence, whereas God rejected the Pharisee and his prayer.

Applying the Parable – Self-righteousness is a very deadly and deceptive sin. It lulls the sinner into thinking that he is a saint. He sincerely believes that he is going to Heaven when in reality he is heading toward Hell. He will think and feel this way all his life until the day he dies, unless there is sincere, genuine repentance and humility. How sad. All the religiosity as signified by the Pharisee's fasting, tithing and prayer were vanities before God. It might impress man but salvation is never about impressing man. Thinking that one is justified before God does not mean that one is really justified before God. His own façade of religiosity fills him with a delusion of self-righteousness. His arrogance betrays a heart of sin full of pride and contempt for others. Man may credit him with salvation because of his façade. The rudest shock he will receive in his life will be in his death. He will be swiftly ushered to Hell's fire where he will spend eternity weeping and gnashing his teeth. On that day his contempt and arrogance would turn to sorrow and tears; all would be lost and it would be too late to repent. His self-righteousness sealed his fate and his pride was the final nail on his own coffin of delusion and death.

In contrast, the justified publican simply cried to God for mercies. He realized his sinful state and repented of it. There was no boasting of deeds done. He humbled himself before God and God received Him. He was justified by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ who cleansed him of all his sins. These words of Christ separate the two for all eternity "*I tell you, this man*

[the publican] *went down to his house justified rather than the other [the Pharisee]: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*”