Introduction

**SLIDE Luke 18:9-14**

Luke’s gospel includes Jesus telling the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector just after other teaching about prayer in another parable about the persistent widow, saying we **should always pray and not give up (v1)**.

Jesus addresses the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to **some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.** Some versions state these are people who **despised** others.

There is nothing wrong in having confidence, but not when it is a false confidence that you are right with God, merely because you are a good person – in this case, the Pharisee clearly kept the Mosaic law and believed, as many others did at the time, that being Jewish and a descendant of Abraham, ensured your passage to heaven.

There are two characters that Jesus portrays. The first is a Pharisee, a group that generally, but not always, gets a bad press as far a NT Biblical writing is concerned.

Origins uncertain, but may have come from the pious Jews who joined with Judas Maccabeus in 169BC to fight against the Greek emperor Antiochus, who attempted to enforce paganism in Judea and especially the Temple. They had pride in their adherence to the Mosaic law (and to Rabbinic-made laws that interpreted God’s law) and often went way beyond those laws in their own personal lives.

By NT times, the Pharisees stood for religious purity and separation – which is actually something that we should all be striving to achieve, but only by focussing on God and Jesus as we do so.

The two men went to pray, but approached God in differing ways.

The Pharisee just spoke about himself – God is almost an afterthought and in his short prayer he repeated the word ‘I’, four times.

It is entirely possible to address your words to God, but actually be praying to yourself, because your focus is on yourself, not on God – we need to constantly check we are praying for God’s agenda, not our own.

The Pharisee praised himself and compared himself to **other people**. It is easy to have a high opinion of yourself if you are selective to who you compare yourself with – you can always find someone worse… **robbers, evildoers and adulterers**.

Those three categories have stood the test of 2000 years and remain people against who we can compare ourselves favourably if we want to feel we are better than other people.

The Pharisee also said he fasted **twice a week** - In Jesus’ time, many Jews fasted on Monday and Thursday each week, in an attempt to gain extra points with God.

‘It is noteworthy that these were the market days when Jerusalem was full of country people. Those who fasted whitened their faces and appeared in dishevelled clothes and those days gave their piety the biggest possible audience.’ (Barclay)

In contrast, Jesus then spoke of a tax collector, definitely not someone who would have come out well in an average piety contest at the time.

Jesus says, that he **stood at a distance… would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me a sinner.’**

In Jesus’ words, the tax collector recognised that he was a **sinner** who needed the mercy of God and that he needed God’s grace.

The tax collector should certainly grab your attention as being lined up as the godliest of the two men. This was not just natural resentment against taxes, but as they were seen as traitors and extortioners.

It was considered treason to collaborate with the Roman authorities, to bring in the money that enabled them to continue the occupation. But it was also seen as an affront to God.

In 6AD there had been an uprising against Roman rule and taxation, that Gamaliel mentions in **Acts 5:37**. In addition when Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar **Luke 20:20-26**, His questioners were setting Him a trap that would make Him fall foul of either the ruling authorities or the people.

The right to collect some taxes was auctioned off to the highest bidder and it was then up to that person to get back what he had just paid the Romans.

From that system had arisen a culture where high profits could be made on payments that were both unjust, but also unavoidable.

The story of Zacchaeus **Luke 19** illustrates this point well.

Yet, Jesus is saying we have a Pharisee praying with eloquent and spiritual words, whilst the tax collector prayed awkwardly, with a sense of fear of God, but Jesus says it was the second prayer that pleased God.

The tax collector **beat his breast**: The idea behind this was that one was so aware of the sin and heart corruption of that one hit at their own heart as a punishment – it was continual action, rather than just one time.

The tax collector asks God to **have mercy**. The word used by Luke is the same word used for an atoning sacrifice. The fullest sense of what the tax collector said was, ‘God, be merciful to me through Your atoning sacrifice for sins, because I am a sinner.’

The only other place this word is used in the New Testament is in **Hebrews 2:17**, where the writer speaks of Jesus being wholly human, so that He would be able to make atonement for the sins of the people before God.

Jesus concludes this parable by saying it was the tax collector who **went home justified before God**, rather than the Pharisee.

He was justified because he recognised that he was a sinner, he humbly prayed for mercy and sought that forgiveness in the only way possible – through the atonement by blood.

He was actually praying that the annual atoning sacrifice, offered by the High Priest at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, would be acceptable in God’s sight, for his forgiveness.

In that declaration of faith, Jesus assures His listeners that that man was instantly **justified**, he was instantly put right with God.

Jesus concludes by saying **all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted**.

The Pharisee saw himself as something great, when he wasn’t.

The tax collector saw himself as a sinner needing God’s mercy, which he did.

There is a principle that God repeats three times in Scripture, the wording changes slightly, but in essence it says, **God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humbleProverbs 3:34, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5.**

In the following verses **SLIDE Luke 18:15-17**, Jesus uses the example of children to show humility.

It was the custom for mothers to bring their children to some distinguished Rabbi on the first birthday that he might bless them and this may have been going on here. Alternatively, the parents may have recognised Jesus as Messiah and wanted His blessing on their child.

Matthew’s account **Matthew 19:13** specifically includes that Jesus should pray for these children – the laying on of hands is used Biblically as a way to bestow blessing on another.

When His disciples tried to stop this practice, Jesus says that the children received His blessing without trying to make themselves worthy of it, or pretending they didn’t need it.

That We need to receive God’s blessings the same way. That is the message from the Pharisee and the tax collector.

It is the fact we need to acknowledge we are sinners – we are not wholly right with God – and come before Him, using Jesus atoning blood to cover our sins.

It is only through Jesus that we can do that – nothing else; fasting, tithing, doing good deeds or anything else will work.

Jesus was very clear when He said that He was the only route to God.

**Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6**

Offer / Pray

**Luke 18**

 **9To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”**

**13‘But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

**14‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’**

**15People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’**

**1 John 1**

**5This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 8If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.**