

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
May 15, 2016

Lesson Text: Luke 18:9-14
Lesson Title: Humble Faith

Introduction

Jesus taught two parables in the first fourteen verses of Luke 18. His first parable in Luke 18:1-8 teaches persistence in prayer. A judge and a widow are the key figures in the parable. The judge served only his own interests; he did not honor God's values in his decision making, nor did he care for the needs of people. The widow who was vulnerable and in need camped on the doorstep of the judge, making her case heard at every opportunity. The judge tried to dismiss the presence of the widow but she finally became too much even for him. Jesus' point in the parable is if an unrighteous judge ultimately gave justice to a widow's persistent requests, how much more can we count on the Lord to "...*avenge his own elect*" (Luke 18:6). The phrase means those chosen and saved by grace should pray persistently and have a confident expectation that the Lord will take care of us.

Luke transitions to the second parable in verse 9-14. This parable is known as the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The purpose of the parable is to show the difference between a righteous man and an unrighteous man. The Publican in the story is the righteous man and the Pharisee is the unrighteous man. The story is exactly opposite of everything the Jews believed and taught. They taught the outward religious works of the Pharisee would have guaranteed his entrance into God's kingdom. There is no way they could conceive of a Publican being justified in the sight of God.

Genuine saving faith is not about works of righteousness which we have done (Titus 3:5). It is about placing our trust in the righteousness of God given to us through the Lord Jesus Christ (James 2:23). That is the heart of the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Either you can achieve righteousness through your own abilities, or you cannot. It is that simple. The Pharisee in this parable is self-righteous and proud of it. The Publican knows he can never be righteous by any merit of his own. He seeks God mercy and goes home justified. He is humble because his faith in Christ is real.

The Pharisee: A Satisfied Man (Luke 18:9-12)

Verse 9

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

“And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” identifies the Pharisees as the target group of this parable. Jesus does not single them out in particular, but his lengthy description fits them perfectly. Furthermore, Jesus featured a “Pharisee” in the story. It is also reasonable to conclude those listening to Jesus respected the Pharisees and, being like them, “trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”

The “Pharisees” were the architects of the self-righteous belief system that dominated the religious life in Israel. They still exist today in every work based salvation and in the hard core legalistic belief system. “Pharisees” attempted to live in strict observance of the traditional and written law. They viewed themselves as superior to others. Jesus issued many stern warnings to “Pharisees” throughout His earthly ministry (Matthew 5:20; 16:6; 23:13-15; 23-29).

“Pharisees” and those who followed in their footsteps “trusted in themselves” and “despised others.” “Trusted” means the Pharisees and those who embraced their teaching “relied on” or “were confident in” their own righteousness. If you believe you are going to heaven based on any type of works, religious or otherwise, you are among the “certain” to whom Jesus is speaking and you are a modern-day “Pharisee.”

“Despised” means “set aside” or “held in contempt.” Self-righteousness and legalism always magnifies self and looks down on others who do not live or think as you. Be careful around “Pharisees.” They have a tendency to cause others to think and act like them.

Verse 10

“Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.”

Jesus introduced “a Pharisee” and a “publican” for the purpose of contrast. These men prayed at the same time and in the same place. Both were probably Jews. But the rest of the story is a study in vivid contrasts.

The “Pharisee” in this story was upright in his outward appearance and probably well respected in the community. He had no criminal record and no visible moral flaws. His reputation preceded him and he played the part of a righteous man very well. If you had met him on the street you probably would not have liked him because of his pride, but he was outwardly a righteous man.

The “publican” in this story was a tax collector. Tax collectors were regarded as sinners as far as the Jews were concerned, especially the Pharisees. Tax collecting for the Roman Empire was a difficult business. The collector could collect anyway he desired as long as Rome got her money. Because of this liberty, tax collectors were notorious for adding to the taxation and keeping a little something for themselves.

Verse 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.”

Jesus described the prayer of the “Pharisee” in terms we would find comical today. He “stood and prayed thus with himself” are words denoting arrogance and self-righteousness. He “stood” means he “stood” alone to avoid contamination by contact with others. He put himself at a distance and on a level above others. His prayer was, as far as these verses are concerned, negative. His righteousness consisted of what he did not do.

He cleverly disguised praise for himself when he said, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men...” Self-righteous people and legalists always invoke “God” when they magnify themselves. It makes them appear to be righteous and spiritual.

The “Pharisee” proceeded to announce his spiritual superiority to “other men.” He uses the personal pronoun “I” five times in two verses. It is obvious who the “Pharisee” worshipped. “Other men” were “extortioners, unjust, adulterers” and “even” tax collectors. This “Pharisee” stated publicly he had never swindled anyone, dealt unjustly with anyone, or committed adultery with another man’s wife. Then he says, “...or even as this publican.” Being superior to the “publican” was icing on the cake!

The only positive aspect to his prayer was he “fasted twice in the week” and he “gave tithes of all” he possessed. Jesus said, *“But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone”* (Luke 11:42). It was right for this “Pharisee” to “tithe.” Along with tithing, he fasted much more frequently than was demanded. But the error of the “Pharisee” was that he made his “tithing” and “fasting” the grounds of his righteousness and justification.

Note: “God” is mentioned once in the “Pharisee’s” prayer and “I” five times. If you listen to people talk and pray you will quickly find out where they stand spiritually.

The Publican: A Justified Man (Luke 18:13-14)

Verse 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.”

In complete contrast to the “Pharisee,” the “publican” was “standing afar off” which probably means along the outer perimeter of the Court of Israel, within sight of the “Pharisee” (verse 11). His “standing afar off” conveyed his sense of unworthiness to approach God, whose presence was represented by the altar complex near the court. Contrary to the “Pharisee” who was glad to stand in with his face lifted toward heaven, the tax collector cannot even look up to heaven. His eyes are focused on the ground beneath his feet. He is overwhelmed with guilt and shame and it shows in his posture. He is everything the “Pharisee” confessed he was not, and the tax collector knows it.

The act of “smiting his breast” is associated with mourning. It indicates he senses his own spiritual death and deserving of God’s judgment. It is a sign of brokenness and contrition. He feels the full weight of his sinfulness and alienation from God. His posture and conduct is not just about being hated by society because of his profession. It is about his standing with God. He is convicted and broken because of his sinfulness.

His request, “God be merciful to me a sinner” stand in total contrast to the “Pharisee” when he said, “God.” The tax collector is actually talking to “God.” His words are the words of a repentant heart. “Sinner” is the Greek word *hamartolos*, {ham-ar-to-los} meaning “the sinner.” The tax collector is speaking as if he is the only sinner in the world.

“Be merciful” equates to the Hebrew word *kippur*, as in “Yom Kippur,” or “Day of Atonement.” The “mercy” he requested was for atoning grace. He asked “God” to make him righteous. He presents no long, drawn-out process of who he is or what he has not done. He makes no promises of what he will or will not do in the future. He does not repeat after some preacher or make a great profession of faith. This humble tax collector simply asked “God” to cover his sins with atoning blood (Romans 5:11).

Verse 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.”

Both the “Pharisee” and the “publican” eventually left the temple and went to their homes, but only one arrived “justified.” “This man” refers to the humble

tax collector who saw himself as the sinner he really was. Jesus wants the listening “Pharisees,” the crowd at the temple, and everyone around to hear what He is about to say. Remember, Jesus is telling this story to “certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (verse 9). When Jesus says, “I tell you,” it is time to sit up and listen!

Jesus said, “This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.” He used the word “justified” to contrast the tax collector’s position to the self-righteous “Pharisee.” “Justified” is a term describing the legal status of a defendant before a judge. The legal status ultimately determines his or her future. If a person was declared “just,” he or she would not receive punishment. If, however, a person was declared “unjust,” he or she could face fines, penalty, imprisonment, or even death.

In His closing words of this parable, Jesus used two terms, “exalteth” and “abased” for contrasting effects. “Exalteth” means “to lift up.” “Abased” means “humble, to make low, small, or insignificant.” Jesus used these two terms to describe two different attitudes in the “Pharisee” and the “publican” which led to different outcomes.

“Exalteth” describes the “Pharisees” attempt to justify himself, to prove himself righteous before God. Everyone stands absolutely guilty before God. His requirement is that man be holy and righteous and no one can meet that requirement. As a result, man either comes to Christ for forgiveness and salvation or he attempts to create his own righteousness. Sadly, most people try to create their own through religious good works.

“Abased” describes the “publican.” He bowed before “God” and asked for “mercy.” Humility is seeing oneself as God sees him or her. The tax collector identified himself as a “sinner.” When he did, God, “exalted” him. He “lifted up” the repentant sinner and set his feet on a solid rock, Jesus Christ the Lord (Psalm 40:1-2).

Conclusion

What is the basis on which you are in a right relationship with God? Is it your good works? Is it based on the fact that you do not drink alcohol, do drugs, or other acts of immorality? Is it based on your infant baptism and confirmation? Is it based on a profession of faith at some point in your life which made no difference in the way you live? Is it based on the fact you are a Baptist, a Lutheran, a Catholic, a Presbyterian or Methodist? If so, you may be standing on your own works and your eternal future is in jeopardy.

What made the difference between the “Pharisee” and the “publican?” The “Pharisee” thought he had earned a right standing with God because of who he was and the way he lived. The “publican” knew he could never be what God

demanded or live as God required. So he called out for mercy from the God he had offended and went home “justified.” The true difference is a humble faith. Do you have it?

Amen.