

## **Humble Faith**

### **Spring Quarter: The Gift of Faith**

#### **Unit 3: The Fullness of Faith**

**Sunday school lesson for the week of May 15, 2016**

**By Dr. Hal Brady**

#### **Lesson Scripture: Luke 18-9-14**

She exclaimed rather excitedly, “God hears and answers every prayer. He gives a yes, a no, or a maybe.”

But according to our scripture lesson, there is a time when God turns a deaf ear. There are some prayers that God will neither hear nor respond to.

In his familiar parable of “the Pharisee and the Tax Collector,” Jesus calls attention to a specific time when God turns a deaf ear. It is in this story that Jesus points out the absolute necessity of “the quality of humility” as the prelude to prayer. Jesus’ purpose here is to alarm and guide “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9).

The parable before us identifies two characteristics of the intended audience. Initially, there are those who think they are right with God through their own efforts. There are religious people who live moral lives and take God’s commandments seriously. By every indication they are what good people should be.

But sadly, their attitude condemns them! They believe that these things give them the status of being right with God. Consequently, they think they deserve to be those who God favors and those who are in a right relationship with God.

Charles Spurgeon, that eminent preacher of another generation, once said that he thought a certain man in his congregation the holiest man he had ever known – till the man told him so himself!

Notice here and this is very important! Jesus does not characterize all his audience this way, only some. Much like the modern-day church, it includes only some.

The second characteristic of this intended audience is that they tend to look down on others who are perceived to be not as good as they are. If we believe we made ourselves righteous, we become judgmental about those who are not as faithful or religious as we are. So this parable confronts both attitudes.

Now, we are told that two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. At first glance, both men seem to have much in common. Both of them went to worship. That’s good. Both prayed, and that’s good. But it is at this point that their similarity ended. Their prayers were so vastly, vastly different.

#### **The Pharisee**

When God turns a deaf ear – we begin with the Pharisee. Said Jesus, “The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself...” (Luke 18:11 CEB). Officially, the prayer was a thanksgiving to God but in reality, it was an essay on self-righteousness. This Pharisee was not really grateful to God, but he was very, very pleased with himself.

Listen to his testimony. I’m quoting from Eugene Peterson’s translation, “The Message.” This proud Pharisee “prayed” this prayer: “Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income” (Luke 18:11, 12).

In reality, with his strong moral life, fasting, and tithing, this Pharisee is not all bad. As a matter of fact, his personal, social and religious behavior are all exemplary.

The problem with the Pharisee is that he has a self-congratulatory attitude about these things. He believes that his performance of these things gives him something to boast about to God. It never crosses his mind that he is able to live in this way because God has enabled him to do so. He seems to think that he deserves to have God listen to him and accept him. His life has been good enough that he thinks he has little need for God’s grace.

It is at this point that we in the church have to be on our guard. That attitude of the Pharisee is dangerously contagious.

Many of us grew up in religious families and have usually maintained our association with the church. Since we haven’t committed a crime, tried to live decently, and been involved with charity work or giving, we tend to think of ourselves as good people. And when we see ourselves that way, we often see little need to come to God and ask for forgiveness. Basically, we are good people so any fault or mistake on our part should be easily overlooked.

To point out how far we have gone with this attitude, many churches today seldom have a confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness in their worship services. Others have difficulty thinking about the death of Jesus as something that deals with sin. Somebody to intervene and die for our sins is just not the way good people think. For these folks, to acknowledge dependence is to demonstrate weakness. Thus, we hate to admit that we need help – or that we do not deserve to have God be in a relationship with us. Now, of course, we don’t brag about these things, but they do point out that the attitude of this Pharisee is alive and well among us.

No wonder God turns a deaf ear to this Pharisee’s prayer. Added to these other things, he compares himself with the tax collector. Do we see it? He compares himself to the wrong standard. Jesus told us that we have only one standard to compare ourselves. Jesus said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This means that we should love as graciously and tolerantly as God. God is our standard and our only standard. This is another lesson this Pharisee had somehow missed.

Before moving on, note further that his prayer never got out of that room. It stayed right there with him in the temple. You see, it really wasn't a prayer. It was pride! We only grow fully by God's grace, and no other way.

### **The Tax Collector**

For a little while, let's look at the prayer God did hear – the tax collector's prayer. Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other..." (Luke 18:14).

"But the tax collector standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). That's the picture Jesus painted of the tax collector.

Almost needless to say, this tax collector's prayer is very different. There is no question of merit in his case. He's a sinner, and he knows it. He has glimpsed his own sinfulness against the burning holiness of God, and all he can say is, "God be merciful to me a sinner!"

So this tax collector sees himself as a sinner, and he's right. He is a sinner. Tax collectors were notorious for collecting the required taxes and then stealing more for themselves. They were permitted by Rome to keep anything they could squeeze out of people. Thus, tax collectors were considered traitors by their fellow Jews. They demonstrated just how low people could go to make a profit.

Now, in commending this tax collector, Jesus is not putting his approval on the man's life style. Far from it! But Jesus is putting his approval on the basis of true prayer, humility – this man's need of God.

For even though he is a sinner, this tax collector knows the proper attitude to have before God. He knows that he does not deserve God's grace and love. His life has simply been a demonstration of his unworthiness. But his posture tells a different story. His posture is an indication of his humility, his recognition of his dependence on God for forgiveness and acceptance. His prayer is that God will have mercy on him.

### **Justified**

Jesus states in verse 14 that this tax collector is justified. It is the people who recognize their dependences on God and confess their sins who are justified.

According to scholars, the term "justified" is used often in the New Testament as the word that means "salvation." It is a term often found in legal settings for being found not guilty, but its nuance in the first century was somewhat different from what that means today. Scholars inform us that the not guilty verdict then signaled that the parties were now to resume the relationship that had been interrupted by the offense. Consequently, in the New Testament it means that the offense that separates a person and God has been wiped out and that God and the sinner are again in right relationship.

The point Jesus makes is that the person who recognizes his/her dependence on God and confesses his/her sin is the one who receives not only forgiveness but also a renewed relationship with God.

### **Final Judgment**

Jesus concludes by saying, "...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:14)

The truth is, in this world, the haughty seem to get their way while the humble are often trampled. In the light of this proverb, what is the explanation? The explanation is that Jesus is not referring to this world, but to our standing at the final judgment, or should I say, our kneeling at the final judgment.

In his warning, Jesus is saying that those who are humble before God, those who recognize their need for and dependence upon God's grace will be received by God in the end. They are the ones God will lift up. And those who think they deserve a place in God's presence will be unpleasantly surprised when God evaluates their lives. Their pride will have resulted in disaster for them.

For sure, we are all sinners and have gone our own way. Thus, at the final judgment, as in life now, we will all depend on God for mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. Simply stated, there is never and will be then no room for self-righteousness in any of us. As Jesus put it, "All who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:14)

### **Lessons from the Tax Collector**

First, recognize the distance! We must be aware that there is a great distance between us and God. "God," the tax collector prayed, "Be merciful to me a sinner!"

Are we aware that there is a great separation between us and God because of our sins? Duh.

Second, change your attitude! The Pharisee's attitude comes through loud and clear. "Thank God," he says, "I am not a sinner like everybody else" (18:11). We will never close the distance with that attitude.

The writer of First John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Third, remember God is approachable!

In John 6:37, Jesus states, "He/she who comes to me I will not cast out." Grace is available to all. God is approachable. We confess our sin, receive Jesus into our hearts and the distance is closed.

A tax collector "justified?" Pronounced right by God? Forgiven? He was a traitor to his country. He was apostate to his church, his friends, his self-respect. A tax collector "justified?" Yes! It is the emphatic words of Jesus Himself. Not that his lifestyle is commended but that he needs God. He has humility and God hears his prayer. And it will be no less true for us.

### **Action Plan:**

1. How would you characterize the people for whom Jesus told this parable?
2. What attitude characterizes those who are put right with God?
3. Why was the Pharisee's prayer not heard?

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