A Parable of Two Sides

9 He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised
everyone else. 10 "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a
tax collector. 11 The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you
that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. 12 I
fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' 13 But the tax collector stood off at a distance and
would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a
sinner.' 14 I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be
humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

The Pharisee and the Publican | Tissot, 1886 | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

Persistence, Presumption, and Promise

This gospel follows the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (18:1-8). While the common thread is certainly prayer, there are other aspects which bind together these two narratives. One of Luke's ongoing themes is the inclusivity of the Gospel. In these two parables, prayers are answered by God for a (saintly and probably poor) widow and the sinful (and probably rich) male tax collector. Luke continues to demonstrate that the Reign of God is open to all – a message of keen importance to his Gentile audience.

The two parables are well placed. Alan Culpepper (*Luke*, 340) notes that "By reading these two parables together, the reader is instructed to pray with the determination of the widow and the humility of the tax collector. Peter Rhea Jones has characterized the complementary themes of the two parables as 'The promise of persistent prayer' (18:1-8) and 'The peril of presumptuous prayer' (vv. 9-14)." Each parable is instructive for the disciples of all ages about the nature of Christian prayer.

Luke Timothy Johnson (*Luke,* 274) writes:

> "The parables together do more than remind us that prayer is a theme in Luke-Acts; they show us why prayer is a theme. For Luke, prayer is faith in action. Prayer is not an optional exercise in piety, carried out to demonstrate one's relationship with God. It is that relationship with God. The way one prays therefore reveals that relationship. If the disciples do not "cry out day

> and night" to the Lord, then they in fact do not have faith, for that is what faith does. Similarly, if prayer is self-assertion before god, then it cannot be answered by God's gift of righteousness; possession and gift cancel each other."

One may assume that when Jesus spoke this parable, Pharisees (and perhaps tax collectors) were present, as they had been in Luke 15:1. Jesus has already characterized the Pharisees and their self-assessed righteousness: "*You* [Pharisees] *justify yourselves in the sight of other, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God*" (Luke 16:15). In fact, Scripture does not mention their presence. Equally as likely an audience is a group of disciples, who like all people, are tempted to pride and self-righteousness. If one considers the leading and trailing verses:

> *9 He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. ... 14 I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

It is plain that this parable draws in all people of every age to confront the attitude of the Pharisees in their own hearts.

With a nod to the literary style of St. Luke, Green (*Luke,* 644) notes the point-for-point polarization between the two characters of the parable:

The Pharisee	***The Toll Collector***
"those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else" (v.9)	"others" regarded with contempt (v.9; cf. v.11)
"one was a Pharisee" (v.10)	"the other was a tax collector" (v.10)
standing by himself (v.11a)	"stood off at a distance" (v.13a)
thanks God for his state of righteousness (vv.11b-12)	addresses God in humility as a sinner with a request for reconciliation (v.13b)
returned home without justification (v.14a)	returned home justified (v.14a)
"everyone who exalts himself will be humbled" (v.14b)	"the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (v.14b)

Insofar as Luke's audience will identify themselves with one or the other of these characters, then, Luke has structured this account so as to render the choices starkly.

What is right

We hear this parable differently than the first century listener. We know how the parable ends and we also know how Luke has been describing the Pharisees, thus even at the words *one was a Pharisee* we know how this will end. Won't it be that the Pharisee will represent the one who trusts himself and his own righteousness rather than God and the one who judges others and holds them in contempt? But let's consider how the first century listener might have heard this narrative.

These two parables are connected linguistically by a number of words with the Greek root -*dik*- = generally referring to "what is right".

Parable of the Persistent Widow	**Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector**
● *ek-dik-eo* – render a just decision (18:3, 5) ● *anti-dik-os* – adversary (18:3) ● *a-dik-ia* – dishonest (18:6) ● *ek-dik-esis* – grant justice (18:7, 8)	● *dik-aios* – righteousness (18:9) ● *a-dik-os* – dishonest (18:11) ● *dik-aioo* – justified (18:14)

According to the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* by Louw & Nida: *dikaios* can mean "pertaining to being in accordance with what God requires," and thus "righteous" by doing what God requires. Wouldn't the first century people assume this meaning applied to the

Pharisee and not to the "sinful" tax collector? Didn't the Pharisee do what God required and the tax collector not?

dikaios also has a more secular meaning: "pertaining to being proper or right in the sense of being fully justified." The tax collectors (and sinners of all stripes) have ways of justifying their actions – convincing themselves that what they have done is proper and right (regardless of what God or others might think).

It is likely that the first century hearers had opposite impressions of the characters. Pharisees often prayed, went to the temple, placed themselves under the Law, were exemplars of right behavior – so they certainly must be trusting God not themselves. Yes? Tax collectors were considered traitors to their fellow Jews. The collected exorbitant levies for the Romans and for their own profits. How could they do such a thing unless they despise their own people. Clearly their actions placed them outside the "chosen ones" – as if lepers to any "right believing" Jew.

However, within the gospel, Luke has already reversed the picture of Pharisees and tax collectors. Tax collectors are baptized (by John – 3:12; 7:29); one, Levi, will follow him (5:27); Jesus eats with them and is called their friend (5:29-30; 7:34); they listen to Jesus (15:1).

In contrast, Pharisees (sometimes with others), question and criticize Jesus (5:21, 30; 6:2, 7; 7:39; 11:38; 11:53; 15:2; 16:14; 17:20); they refuse John's baptism and reject God's gift (7:30); yet, Jesus eats with Pharisees (7:36; 11:37; 14:1), but pronounces woes on them (11:42-43).

The Righteous Who Despise

He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. The use of *exoutheneo* – "to despise" (v.9) raises an interesting question about who are the self-righteous people who are despising others in Luke's time. Is this parable directed against Pharisees and others outside the community of believers who despise those inside the church? In Luke's other uses of the word, it refers to those who despised or rejected Jesus (Luke 23:11; Acts 4:11). With this understanding, it might be easier for (self-righteous) Christians to assume that the problem is with "those people out there," but not with "us".

However, looking at the other uses of the word – all in Paul, it is usually directed towards those inside the church who despise other members of the community of faith. In all but two instances, Paul uses the word in this way (Romans 14:3, 10; 1Corinthains 16:11; 2Corinthains 10:10; Galatians 4:14; 1Thess 5:20). One exception is 1 Corinthians 1:28 where God chooses what is "despised" in the world; the other is 1 Cor 6:4 about a judge who "has no standing" in the church. With this understanding, *those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else* are also among believers.

The Pharisee

The Pharisees were not villains. They were dedicated to observing the law. The Pharisee in our text actually exceeds the law's demands. Fasting twice a week rather than once a week. Tithing on all he gets rather than just the foods and animals (Dt 14:22) for which it is required. [see Note on Luke 18:12 below] According to temple standards, Pharisees are the "good guys" – the "righteous" – and this Pharisee does even more than the ordinary Pharisee. Are the "temple standards" the correct ones? Clearly there is some merit as the traditions of fasting and tithing continue into the Christian spiritual practices.

What about the Pharisee's prayer? There are records of ancient prayers similar to the Pharisee's and such prayers were not considered self-righteous boasting. The following prayer of thanksgiving from the Talmud was prayed by the rabbis on leaving the house of study.

> I give thanks to Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou has set my portion with those who sit in the Beth ha-Midrash [the house of study] and Thou has not set my portion with those who sit in [street] corners for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward and they

> labor and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the future world and they run to the pit of destruction. [*b. Ber*. 28b

A similar ancient prayer (with something offense to our modern sensibilities) is found in the Talmud:

> R. Judah said: One must utter three praises everyday: Praised (be the Lord) that He did not make me a heathen, for all the heathen are as nothing before Him (Is 40:17); praised be He, that He did not make me a woman, for woman is not under obligation to fulfill the law; praised by He that He did not make me ... an uneducated man, for the uneducated man is not cautious to avoid sins. [*t. Ber.* 7.18] [p. 59]

So it would seem that the Pharisee's prayer thanking God that he is not like the rest of humanity was not all that unusual. He is the model of the pious man, both by what he did do (fasting and tithing); and by what he didn't do – acting like thieves, evil people, adulterers, and tax collectors. The word Pharisee ("those set apart') is reflected in his posture of prayer – apart from the others.

Then he *spoke this prayer to himself*. The phrasing in Greek is awkward, lending itself to several possible understandings. One understanding is neutral: he simply assumed a posture of prayer and prayed quietly to himself. Two other understandings are negative: he prayed to himself rather than to God, or he prayed with reference to himself but with an eye to the tax-collector.

The Pharisee asks nothing of God. Why? Is he satisfied that his fasting and tithing are sufficient – reflecting a works-salvation mentality? Does he assumes these actions reflect his piety and that he is not a sinner? What is clear is that his prayer gives no evidence of humility or contrition.

The Tax Collector

"I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners." (Luke 5:32)

"*...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance*." (Luke 15:7)

'O God, be merciful to me a sinner."(Luke 18:13) Four aspects of the tax-collectors humility are briefly indicated by Luke: (1) he stood far off, (2) he kept his eyes lowered, (3) he beat his beast as a sign of repentance, an (4) he cries out for mercy. Unlike the Pharisee the tax collector gives at least some evidence of humility and contrition. He stands apart not because of his worry about defilement, rather he knows his unworthiness. Rather than suggest that he himself is *daikaios* (righteous), the tax collector self-identifies with exactly what the Pharisee considered him to be: a sinner (*hamartōlós*). Further, rather than speak to God via a reference to the Pharisee, the tax collector straight forwardly begs for mercy.

Culpepper (*Luke,* 342) notes:

> If the Pharisee asks nothing of God, the tax collector boasts nothing before God. His prayer echoes the opening words of Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God." The crucial addition to the words of Psalm 51, however, is the tax collector's self-designation: "a sinner." Nothing more is said of the tax collector's prayer. It is complete as it stands, and nothing more needs to be said of his character.

A Parable of Reversal?

I tell you, the latter [tax collector] *went home justified*. The verb tense makes it clear that it is God who has justified this person. What does *dikaioo* mean? Lowe & Nida give the following for *dikaioo*:

1. to cause someone to be in a proper or right relation with someone else
2. to demonstrate that something is morally right
3. the act of clearing someone of transgression
4. to cause to be released from the control of some state or situation involving moral issues

It seems that 1 and 3 best fit the context. The tax collector goes home in a right relationship with God, because God made the relationship right. It was not something the tax collected did for himself (self-justification). The word also implies that he went home having been freed (by God) of his sin or guilt. He came to the temple "a sinner" and went home forgiven.

We might object to God forgiving the tax collector. He doesn't actually confess any sins. He makes no statement of repentance. He doesn't offer to change his life. He doesn't make any reparations for his sins (as the tax collector Zacchaeus does). This appears to be very cheap grace. This parable probably should not be understood as an example story, but is it simply a story of reversal, as the final saying indicates. If the Pharisee is viewed as a villain and the tax collector a hero, besides the historical inaccuracies, the parable loses its power. They have only received what they deserved. There is no need for the reversal in this last verse.

The parable as a whole is a challenge to our normal expectations. If "justification" comes because of either the Pharisee's righteous life-style or the tax collector's prayer, then aren't they, in some way, justifying themselves? If "justification" comes in spite of one's life-style or prayer, then it is totally dependent upon God's graciousness. Our motivation for living rightly or praying honestly needs to be something different than to "get something from God."

Craddock (*Luke*, 211) concludes his comments on this text with:

> For this parable to continue to speak with power, the preacher will need to find in our culture analogous characters. The Pharisee is not a venomous villain and the publican is not generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the good-hearted hooker. Such portrayals belong in cheap novels. If the Pharisee is pictured as a villain and the tax collector as a hero, then each gets what he deserves, there is no surprise of grace and the parable is robbed. In Jesus' story, what both receive is "in spite of," not "because of." When the two men are viewed in terms of character and community expectations, without labels or prejudice, the parable is still a shock, still carrying the power both to offend and to bless. But perhaps most important, the interpreter of this parable does not want to depict the characters in such a way that the congregation leaves the sanctuary saying, "God, I thank thee that I am not like the Pharisee." It is possible that the reversal could be reversed.

A Parable of Right Relationships

Culpepper (*Luke*, 343) concludes his comments with:

> The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, contrary to some interpretations, is a two-sided parable. To read it as simply a warning against pride, self-sufficiency, or a relationship with God based on one's own works is to miss the other side of the parable, which connects the Pharisee's posture before God with his contempt for the tax collector. To miss this connection would be tantamount to emulating the Pharisee's blindness to the implications of his attitude toward the tax collector. The nature of grace is paradoxical: It can be received only by those who have learned empathy for others. In that regard, grace partakes of the nature of mercy and forgiveness. Only the merciful can receive mercy, and only those who forgive will be forgiven (6:36-38). The Pharisee had enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be humble. As a result, his religion drove him away from the tax collector rather than toward him.

In its own way, this parable is as though a scene from Jesus' teaching of the greatest commandments: to love God – and to love your neighbor as yourself. If we find our relationship to God in Jesus raises barriers to others, then we have embarked on the journey with blind spots that require healing.

Notes

Luke 18:9 ***He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else***: This verse echoes Ezek. 33:13, a text in which the prophet had criticized his contemporaries for trusting in their own righteousness: "Though I say to the righteous [*tō dikaiō*] that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness [*pepoithen epi tē dikaiosynē autou*] and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered; but in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die."

convinced…righteousness: The Greek *pepothoitas* (from the verb root *péthō*) normally means "to convince" or "to persuade;" however, it can also secondarily mean "to seduce," "to corrupt." The word is used to translate the Hebrew *bṭḥ*, which expresses confidence, hope, trust, security, and peace. The word for used for "righteousness" (*díkaioi*) refers to what is right in the context of the covenant and in relationship to God. A dynamic translation might be "those who seduced themselves that they were in right relationship to God."

Luke 18:11 ***took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself***: The phrasing in Greek is awkward, lending itself to several possible understandings. One understanding is neutral: he simply assumed a posture of prayer and prayed quietly to himself. Two other understandings are negative: he prayed to himself rather than to God, or he prayed with reference to himself but with an eye to the tax-collector. ***not like the rest of humanity***: *hoi loipoi*, referring to the people generally has an elitist edge in reference to the speaker, made all the more plain by the context of its use herein. ***greedy, dishonest, adulterous***: In the Greek nouns are in use versus the NAB's conversion to adjective. A more literal translation of these nouns would be "thieves, the unrighteous, adulterers."

Luke 18:12 ***I fast twice a week…pay tithes***: The reference to fasting in 18:12 echoes the stipulation to fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29, 32; Num. 29:7), during Purim (Esther 9:31), and during further annual days of fasting (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19), as well as OT passages that report fasting by individuals as an expression of mourning (2 Sam. 12:21), penance (1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 10:6), and supplication (Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3) (see Fitzmyer 1981–1985: 1187; Nolland 1989–1993: 876). Verse 12 is the earliest text that attests the Jewish custom of fasting twice a week. Fasting involved eating only bread and drinking only water. The reference to tithing recalls Lev. 27:30–32; Num. 18:21–24; Deut. 14:22–27.

Luke 18:13 ***would not even raise his eyes to heaven***: The tax collector's reticence echoes Ezra's prayer upon hearing of the numerous mixed marriages in Jerusalem: "O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens" (Ezra 9:6). Both of the situational comments in 18:13a—the downward gaze and the breast-beating—speak of a deep sense of unworthiness and embarrassment. ***be merciful***: The verb used is from *hiláskomai* used to translate the Hebrew *kipper*. The use of these words occurs in relation to the offerings prescribed by the OT Law and along with such terms as "to free from sin," "to purge," and "to sanctify" – all leading to the concept of "expiation" the offering and the act of offering a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 18:14 ***the latter went home justified***: "the latter" referring to the tax collector was justified. The verb tense makes it clear that it is God who has justified this person – God now sees him as justified.

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