

A Proud or Humble Heart? - Luke 18:9-14

Context

We see opposite's in life all the time. Our world is made up of many different and diverse things. And one result we can often end up seeing is people challenging one another. Different opinions and ways of doing things that are either encouraged or look down upon in society.

We've seen the example of Harry and William in debate over the last few years, with multiple allegations thrown here, there and everywhere. It's common to find two hearts, differing in opinion and being found to be in contrast with one another.

As we come to our passage today it's really important to set the scene and to show why Jesus is teaching a parables to those around him. Verse 9 gives us this Context. Jesus is in the midst of individuals who were confident of their own self-righteousness, in other words, they thought they were totally fine in the eyes of God, they didn't have to worry because they did the right things, and had done enough good things to make sure they get into heaven. Their worth and perceived entry into heaven was based on their own works. They had the power within themselves to overcome sin and be with God.

Jesus uses an example of prayer to show two very different hearts, one that is prideful and arrogant and the other that is sorrowful, broken and recognises the need for God.

As with many good stories we need to know the characters in play and Jesus tells of our two characters in verse 10. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector'.

So who is a Pharisee and who is a Tax collector?

Well, in the time of Jesus there were 4 different schools of thought. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots are mentioned about in the Gospels and then the Essenes we learn about in religious history. This group called the Pharisees that we hear about in our story today were the strictest sect of Jews. Their name meant 'set apart'. Outwardly the Pharisees did good things, praying regularly, giving, fasting are all examples of good living but the problem they had was within their hearts. Matthew 23:27 says 'You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.' They clung on to traditions and laws, thinking that would bring righteousness, which means to be a good person who follows God and is set apart as holy, but instead just showed them to be hypocrites because their outside works didn't match up with their inward heart. Their concern was with looking holy on the outside without having a heart that loved God and loved people.

Who is the tax collector then, well in Mark 2:15-16 we see that the Pharisees had a particular dislike of Tax Collectors. They showed their horror that Jesus would share food with Tax Collectors and other sinners. A Tax collector didn't have a great reputation amongst the local population, especially those of Jewish descent. Although Tax Collectors were Jewish, they were seen as traitors because they worked for the Romans and helped

source finance for their oppressive regimes. Beyond this, Tax Collectors were particularly hated because they were known to, openly, demand more in tax than was required and keep the extra for themselves. You can actually just read on in Luke to chapter 19 and see the story of a tax collector called Zacchaeus, who openly admits to this stealing in verse 8.

As we can quickly see these two men are polar opposite in the local society. Light and dark, north and south, love and hate. Opposite in most aspects of life. One held in high regard and one who was shunned by the community. This is the setting then, for these two characters, totally different in standing but coming to the temple at the same time of public worship, to pray.

Although this passage is short, Jesus is saying some profound things, for those listening to him. And I want to highlight three brief points from this Parable. This story calls us to reflect upon Our Posture when coming before God, Our Prayer that we bring to God, and Our Position before God.

1. Our Posture when coming before God

How do human beings communicate? Our first thought would be to think about talking. Our verbal communication. Our language, how we speak, maybe we could think about our tone of voice, our pitch and speed. But as well as our verbal communication we use a whole range of non-verbal communication methods. Our body language, our gestures, how we express things through our facial expression, how we make or avoid eye contact. We use a whole range of different approaches to communicate things to other people.

Well our Posture in any given context is part of our communication. A particular approach or attitude is the definition of Posture. And in this parable Jesus shows us there is a lot to be said about the Posture that these two men when coming to pray.

One thing I found interesting here is the amount of words used to describe each man's approach in coming to prayer.

The Pharisee's posture is described in seven words. Verse 11 says 'The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed:' The Pharisee came to the temple courts, found a spot, away from others to separate himself whilst also remaining in the view of all the surrounding people. His posture showed his arrogance, his pride and the fact that he didn't care about his approach to God, because he already believed he was righteous and set apart.

Then we can flip over and think about the posture of the Tax collector. Whereas the Pharisee had seven words describing his approach, in verse 13, we see it say 'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said...'. There are twenty-two words describing the posture of the Tax-collector. Within that we see three points highlighted about his approach. He firstly stood at a distance, he didn't feel he could come before God, he may have felt embarrassed to be close to others, knowing that he was shunned and hated by many. So he hides himself away in the corner, standing at a distance. Secondly he wouldn't look up to heaven. The

common approach to pray was that of looking too heaven, so that the individuals could direct there prayers up to God. But the tax collector couldn't do that, it showed his sense of shame. And the tax collectors third action was to beat his breast. This gesture was normally associated with death, funerals and most commonly was done by women. It was a gestures of despair that wasn't normally part of Jewish pray in the temple. But this detail shows the chasm that the Tax collector feels between himself and God.

Both mens approach to prayer shows the priority and condition of there hearts. As the society saw the contrast on the two men outwardly, God sees the difference of there hearts. Outwardly the Pharisee is important, does the right things and demand respect, compared to a sinful and shunned tax collector but inwardly God see the rolls reversed. The Proudful arrogance of the Pharisee compared to the humble brokenness of the Tax collector.

2. The Prayer that we bring to God

As we mentioned non-verbal communication is vastly important and thats what we see in the posture of these men as they approach God. It sets the platform for the words that they are going to say as they pray to God.

And as we think about the two prayers that these two men bring we see a reversal in comparison of there posture. The Pharisee uses thirty-three words in his prayer. He focuses on the failures of others around him and points out his own view of his self-righteousness, 'Thanking God he isn't like other people' in verse 11. He then goes on in verse 12 to highlight the good things he does to cement his own worthiness, the fact that he fast twice a week, which is far more than is required and the fact that he gives a tenth of all the money he gets and possession he owns. The Pharisee is full of pride, in his own achievements and the failures of others. The pride of Pharisee causes him to have a warped view of himself, a false view of his own righteousness and a hateful view of others.

The tax collector on the other hands has a very simple prayer, of seven words. In verse 13, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. His prayer is to the point and covered with humility. Both men start there prayer by directing them to God, but the pharisee from then on only thinks of himself whereas the Tax collector only thinks about God. Recognising his need from Gods point of view. And the two facts the tax collector points out in his prayer are fundamental for every human in all of history. 'I am a sinner' and 'I need God's mercy'. The tax collector recognises this, and in his humbleness, in his brokenness, with despair to the point of death. He cries out to God for mercy. He knows he has no ability within himself to do good, society around him has made that very clear.

Much like the opening chapter of Charles Dickens A Tale of Two Cities starts by saying "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..."

These two prayers are in complete contrast to one another. As Jesus has been showing through this parables, the men are opposite to one another, their postures towards God are different and their prayers show the magnitude of the divide.

And unsurprisingly the results for these two men, before God are seen in black and white.

3. Our Position before God

Jesus uses the term Justified in verse 14. To be justified means to be declared or made righteous in the sight of God.

As both men arrive to pray, the Pharisee thinks his position is secure, he believes he is justified before God, because of his knowledge, his actions and his position in society. Whereas the tax collector comes that day knowing he is as far away from God as possible. But as we come to verse 14 we see that the opposite is true. The tax collector leaves the temple justified before God, where the Pharisee leaves unjustified, living in his own denial and self-righteousness. For all of us here today we have either been justified before God or we are still unjustified in his eyes.

Our position before God is in either one of those two camps. And we need to seriously think through where we find ourselves. Do we want to be made right with God and therefore exalted, brought to a relationship with him or are we going to keep living in our own worthiness?

Well to be made right with God starts with a respectful recognition that we must have a humble heart. Even though the world around these two men taught differently. Jesus showed that humility brings life, whilst pride only brings death.

Application

So what do we take from this Parable. I don't think any of us are Pharisees per se, and maybe we are just finding out about Jesus altogether. Well, there are some great things we can take away for ourselves. Things that will aid our growth in Christ and ultimately help us follow the call to live a transformed life.

Firstly, don't be naive in thinking that we are all that far away from the Pharisee. Yes, we aren't outwardly the same. I would hope we wouldn't pray similar words to those in this parable and put ourselves in such an obviously self-inflated position but we can so easily have the same heart problems that are seen in the Pharisee. We can be boastful, we can easily fall into judging people unjustly. We can even end up reversing genuine humility with pride as we thank God we aren't like the religious Pharisees. For example it could be so easy for the Sunday School Teacher to pray 'Thank you God, that we aren't like the Pharisees' when teaching this passage. Although the right intentions were there, we can end up just reflecting what the Pharisees thought about the people around them, on those who are around us. We mustn't become naive, we should always check ourselves before God, because we can so easily end up with similar heart traits too that of the Pharisees.

What is the posture of our heart toward God? As we can see the approach, the posture, the communication that we have with God isn't just found in our words. It's found in how we come before him in prayer, and beyond, in a wider sense, that it's seen in the way we live our lives. If we only think it's our words that matter in reflecting Jesus, then what about the other 90% of our communication. Does that reflect Jesus?

Just like a husband can say to his wife, "I love you," over and over again, but if he never does anything to *show* her he loves her, then his words become empty or less meaningful. However, when the husband helps his wife clean the kitchen or take care of the kids, then he is actively demonstrating his love for her and his words have significance. Our words matter and they are powerful, they should talk about Jesus. But our actions and attitude to all kinds of areas of our lives show Jesus to the world that we live in. Therefore we can take this important idea of thinking through our posture in prayer and apply it in a wider sense of living faithfully as a Christian. We can use our posture to show the world of the goodness of God, with a good attitude, with compassion and care as well as a good character in all we do. This will give a wonderful platform of truth and honesty for our words to be shown on.

And lastly, there is a reminder to, both those who don't know Jesus at all yet, and are discovering more about him, and all of us when we are struggling in our walk with Jesus. When we realise our brokenness and need for God. There is a humbling challenge, and one I want to leave us with. In as simple possible terms.

If God is real, then the Bible says he is Holy, perfect and set apart. Humans on the other hand are sinners, we've got stuff wrong, we are separated from him. That's the problem.

The need: To be reunited with God.

Then the solution: We must come to Jesus, with a humble hearts and do as the Tax Collector did, recognise that we are sinners and cry out to God, that he would have mercy on us.

We must pray that prayer with sincerity and humility of heart. 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

This prayer is found at the very start of the journey with Jesus but also brings comfort as we keep walking with him.

Jesus sees humans in those two contrasting camps. And reverses the worlds normal order of comparing fame and fortune with those who are shunned in society. The prideful are rejected and the humble are accepted. This is the transformation found in the good news of Jesus.