



MINISTRIES

A Ministry of the Athens Universal Life Church
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<https://aulc.us>

TITLE: Not Like Other Men

SERMON IN A SENTENCE: In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Jesus teaches us not to celebrate our virtues but to acknowledge our need of forgiveness.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 18:9-14

Today's scripture lesson, comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18, verses 9 to 14.

Starting at verse 9:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else:

“Two men went up to the temple complex to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee took his stand and was praying like this: ‘God, I thank You that I’m not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes to heaven but kept striking his chest and saying, ‘God, turn Your wrath from me—a sinner!’

I tell you, this one went down to his house justified rather than the other; because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

-- May the Lord add His Blessing to the reading of His Word!

-- I am Doctor Rob White with the A U L C Ministries with our message this week.

-- I am happy that you can take a few minutes out of your busy week to be with us today!

Today's Gospel lesson is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. This is the kind of scripture that preachers love to preach on.

- First, it's a story, and it's easy to hold people's attention with a story.
- Second, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector comes out where we want it to come out. The Pharisee is a super-religious prig, a holier-than-thou type whose self-righteousness offends us. Right away, we don't like him. In this parable, the self-righteous Pharisee ends up as the goat of the story.

The PHARISEE'S prayer went like this:

"God, I thank you, that I am not like the rest of men,
extortioners, unrighteous, adulterers,
or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week.
I give tithes of all that I get" (verses 11 and 12).

We don't have any reason to believe that the Pharisee was exaggerating. Pharisees have gotten a lot of bad press, but in many ways they were really good people. Pharisees prided themselves on keeping God's commandments—on keeping them better than anyone—and they probably did just that.

Keeping God's commandments isn't a bad thing, is it? Is it bad to be proud of keeping God's commandments? We are often proud of lesser things.

- I have a friend who was a college athlete. He's older now, and is proud that he still plays a mean game of tennis. I think that it's wonderful that he keeps in shape, but that doesn't seem as lofty as keeping God's commandments.
- I know people who are proud of having done well in business or their profession. They have risen to the top, and they are proud of that. I think that it's wonderful that they have done well, but not as wonderful as trying to do what God wants.
- I know people who are proud of their luxury cars or their luxury homes or their collections of this or that. Those are all lovely things, but not as lovely as devotion to God.

Nevertheless, when we hear this Pharisee pray, "God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men," we know that something is wrong. We don't like the guy, and we suspect that Jesus might not like him either. We know that Jesus is going to give this Pharisee his comeuppance. When Jesus does so, we stand on the sidelines cheering. We always enjoy seeing prideful people brought down a notch.

The other man in the parable is a *TAX-COLLECTOR*. To understand this parable, you have to understand that the Jews had even less use for tax-collectors than we do:

- Tax collectors worked for the Romans, who had sent soldiers to occupy Israel. In other words, tax collectors were working for the enemy. They had sold out their own people.
- Tax collectors were often dishonest. If you owed \$1000 in taxes, they could send you a bill for \$1500 and pocket the difference. The tax collector in Jesus' parable was, undoubtedly, a low-life and a scoundrel. If the people listening to Jesus didn't like the self-righteous Pharisee, they would have even less affection for this tax collector.

When it came time to pray, the tax collector was too ashamed even to look to heaven. Instead, he beat his breast and prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (verse 13).

We know that the tax collector was a bad man, but there's something touching about his asking for mercy. We know that God is merciful, so we feel that this man is on the right track. Also, we enjoy rooting for the underdog, and this man is the spiritual underdog in this story. When he acknowledges that he is a sinner and asks forgiveness, something in us wants to give him a break.

In fact, whenever I read this parable, I find myself thinking, "Thank God I'm not like the Pharisee. Thank God I'm humble like this tax collector."

And then I realize how tricky this parable is. Once I say, "Thank God I'm not like this Pharisee," I become the Pharisee. It's this phrase, "Thank God that I am not..." that's the problem, and I too often find myself saying it—at least to myself.

- Thank God I'm not like those drug addicts.
- Thank God I'm not like those people on welfare.
- Thank God I'm not like those thieves who break in and steal.

The list goes on and on, doesn't it! Each of us has a list of people whom we consider especially offensive. While we might not be so bold as to pray, "Thank God I'm not like those people," that thought does, all too often, occur to us.

So my relationship to this parable is much like the relationship of an insect to a pitcher plant. The pitcher plant looks innocent and delicious to insects, but it's a carnivore—it feeds on insects. The pitcher plant looks attractive to insects, which land on its downward sloping leaves. But soon the insect finds itself sliding down the slippery leaves toward the deadly center where the plant's digestive juices await it. Soon the insect has gone beyond the point of no return. Soon the insect becomes lunch for the pitcher plant.

This parable looks harmless, too. We enjoy watching the Pharisee get his comeuppance. The parable draws us in until we suddenly find ourselves trapped. C.S. Lewis put it this way. He said:

"No sooner do we believe that God loves us
than there is an impulse to believe that He does so,
not because HE is love,
but because WE are intrinsically loveable."

That's what happened to the Pharisee. And that's what happens to me as I read this parable. And, I suspect, that's what happens to you at some point too.

"God, I thank you that I am not like that person." When have you said that? Have you ever thought it?

"God, I thank you that I am not like that person." That's a sin that plagues nearly everyone. It's the sin of *UNRELIGIOUS* people. They pray:

"Thank God that I'm not a hypocrite.
Thank God that I'm not like those churchgoers.
I might not be very good,
but at least I don't pretend to be better than I am.
Thank God that there's nothing two-faced about me."

But it's also the sin of *RELIGIOUS* people—especially the sin of religious people—church people—good, God-fearing Christians—good citizens—people who pay their taxes and do their work. In other words, it becomes our sin when we pray:

"Thank God I am not like those lowlifes!
Thank God I am not like those sinners!
Thank God that I try to do the right thing.
I might not always succeed, God,
but my heart is in the right place."

This is certainly a problem for Christian *FUNDAMENTALISTS*. They find it so tempting to pray:

"God, I thank you that I am not like other people —
carousers, Biblically illiterate, doctrinally unsound.
I attend church every time the doors are open,
and I give generously of my time and money."

But this parable is no kinder to *LIBERALS*. How tempting it is for liberals to pray:

"God, I thank you that I am not like other people —
like those fundamentalists,
caught up with all their rules and regulations.
Thank you, God, that I help the helpless.
Thank you, God, that I pressure the government to develop humane laws.
Thank you, God, that I am not like those fundys."

This parable is even a problem for *SINNERS*. The tax collector was a sinner, of course, but the parable doesn't let sinners off the hook. Donald Bloesch reminds us:

"The laxity of the Publican is just as repugnant to God
as the self-righteousness of the Pharisee.
In the parable it is not the *PUBLICAN* as such
but the *REPENTANT* Publican who is praised."

So this parable afflicts all of us, and there's a terrible penalty associated with the Pharisee's pride. C.S. Lewis again has the right words. He says:

"A proud person is always looking down on things and people;
and, of course, as long as you're looking down,
you can't see something that's above you."

Or, as Dwight L. Moody put it:

"God sends no one away empty,
except those who are full of themselves."

Or as Jesus put it:

"Everyone who EXALTS himself will be humbled,
but he who HUMBLER himself will be exalted" (verse 14).

The answer to the problem is simple. Jesus gives us the answer in the parable. The answer is found in the tax collector's prayer. Too ashamed even to lift up his eyes to heaven, the tax collector prayed, "GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME, A SINNER."

That prayer was all it took for the publican to be forgiven.

And that prayer is all it takes for us to be forgiven.

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner." That's the prayer that saves. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." In this parable, that's how Jesus teaches us to pray.

-- That's our Lord's message for this Lord's Day and I hope you got a blessing out of it!

-- Go out this week and be a blessing and be blessed! -- For the more you are a blessing, the more you will be blessed!

-- Thank you all for watching and listening and we will see you all next week!

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