

Two People, Two Prayers, Two Paths
Luke 18:9-14

We are asked or ask a lot of questions throughout the course of a day.

Where did I put my keys?

What time is lunch?

What are we having for dinner?

Who left the refrigerator door open?

Is that report finished yet?

When will you get to that leaky faucet?

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. It's a simple question. Perhaps it's a question that we should be asked every day. I don't mean to appear rude in asking the question or to make anyone angry or even imply anything by it. I ask it simply to make you think.

Would you describe yourself as religious or repentant? There are a lot of different kinds of people in the world, but I think we can all be boiled down to one of these two people. I think even for the person who says they are not religious, if asked the right kinds of questions would have to admit that in some way even they are religious.

So are you religious or repentant? Those are the two types portrayed in our passage. With your Bibles open, turn to Luke 8:9-14. Here we have two people offering two prayers with two paths. Please stand as we read this passage together.

Jesus ended chapter 17 discussing what it will be like when He returns to set up the kingdom of God on earth and bring judgment. It will be business as usual. People will be going about their daily lives unconcerned about the impending judgment or the punishment that awaits them because they did not prepare their heart for His return. He then began chapter 18 with a call to pray. Talking to the disciples He stated "that they should pray and not give up." It was an encouragement to pray so that they wouldn't get discouraged and lose hope as they

waited for His return when everything around them was going from bad to worse. We are to keep praying each day for the Lord's return.

When He does return He will bring judgment on those who refused Him as King.

In this passage, Jesus tells another parable. Scholars believe that this parable was told at another time because it does not have a word connecting it to the previous discussion. They believe Luke inserted it here because of the emphasis it has on prayer allowing for the natural question that comes from it. How does a person become part of this kingdom? There is a lot of discussion among the religious community about how this happens. They claim that there are many ways. In fact, they say every way is right and eventually get you into God's kingdom, but Jesus, through this parable, gives us the only way to heaven. With all the various religions in the world there are really only two kinds of people who will end up on two different paths.

Consider with me the following from our text:

Two opposing people

Two offered prayers

Two opposite paths

I. TWO OPPOSING PEOPLE - v. 9-10

Why did Jesus tell this particular parable?

Everything He did or said had a purpose. Verse 1 indicates that there were some in the crowd who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. It is to this group that Jesus directs the parable, those who smugly think how good they are in comparison to everyone else, confident that their good character will gain them heaven. Jesus begins by indicating that there were two people. The first person is a Pharisee.

A. The Pharisee – v. 10

They were the religious elite. Their name means Separatists. It's not certain where the name came

from. Some believe it originated in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when Israel made the decision to separate from the customs of the pagans living around them. Others believe it was a decision to separate from the Greek lifestyle that had begun to infiltrate Jewish culture. Still others believe that it arose during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes.

After he had invaded and conquered Israel, he rode back into Jerusalem on hearing that Israel was planning a revolt, killing 40,000 Jews and selling as many or more into slavery. He ransacked the Temple of its treasure. Several years later he attempted to conquer Egypt but was arrested by the Roman Senate who ordered him to leave the country. To vent his anger, as he was returning he passed through Palestine and ordered 22,000 troops to destroy Jerusalem. He entered the Temple and desecrated it by offering a pig on the altar and committing many other abominations. He ordered that all sacrifices were to cease and a decree was made that anyone who did not conform to the religion of the sovereign would die.

That act on his part started the Maccabean war in which Israel revolted led by the Maccabees who took back Jerusalem. It was during this time that the name Pharisee is mentioned in historical literature. Out of this group came a separatist movement to strictly keep the traditions that had arisen from the law. They had great influence over the people of Israel. As their influence grew their religious and political influence gained power. As I mentioned, they stressed tradition which morphed into legalism – the very thing that Jesus often confronted them about.

Jesus described them as white washed tombs, hypocrites and blind guides. He describes them in Matthew 23.

“...they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to

see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’” (Matthew 23:3b-7)

They believed that by virtue of their religious position and their pious life they were guaranteed heaven. A Pharisee is the first person in the parable.

The second person is a publican.

B. The Publican

A publican was a tax collector. He collected revenue for Rome. A tax agent resided in Rome and had under him tax agents who lived in the regions that were part of Rome’s Empire. Under these were the men who had the responsibility of assessing the value of goods and enforcing the tax. If you brought a bale of hay to the market to sell its value was arbitrarily assessed and payment made. The tax yesterday wasn’t necessarily the tax assessed today. If Rome set the tax at a certain price, the next person would raise that and the next person would raise that. You had no choice but to pay what was assessed or risk some kind of retribution, even though you knew it was, well, highway robbery since tax booths were set up on roads. They were in the habit of committing fraud and extortion. Anything and everything was taxed. When stopped at the tax booth, every item had to be unloaded off a cart, every package opened, every pocket emptied. We can well understand why they had such a bad reputation. They were dishonest.

To make matters worse, they were Jews defrauding their own countrymen. They were branded as traitors. They didn’t think twice about what they were doing. They were the pond scum of society, the lowest of the low and consequently couldn’t worship in the Temple.

In the minds of those listening to Jesus tell this parable no two people were more different than the Pharisee and the Publican.

One was a religious fanatic, the other a rotten fink. One was commended, the other was corrupt.

We might liken the one to the Dali Llama or Mahatma Ghandi, while the other we might think of as Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein.

Jesus uses two people, opposite in every way. They are even different in the prayers they offered.

II. TWO OFFERED PRAYERS – v. 11-13

He first speaks about the religious prayer.

A. The Religious Prayer – v. 11-12

1. His prayer was conceited
2. His prayer was condescending

His prayer oozed with conceit. It's filled with pride and arrogance, smugness and superiority. This guy had an "I" problem and it's not the kind you see with. It's a personal pronoun. I, me, my. In this short prayer, he refers to himself no less than five times in the KJV.

He was puffed up about himself. It is not a prayer of thanksgiving to God for blessings. It was a prayer to God about himself. He was really telling God that He should be thankful to have such a wonderful person on His team. God should be really pleased with him. Today, a church might think they are pretty fortunate to have such an example of religious piety. He was conceited.

Notice his posture as he prays.

a. His posture

He is standing when he prays. Now let me say right away that there is nothing wrong with standing to

pray. Scripture describes a number of postures that are appropriate when we pray.

Genesis 24:12-14 and I Samuel 1:26 speak about standing while praying.

Judges 21:2-3; II Samuel 7:18 and I Kings 19:4 refer to sitting.

I Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5 and Daniel 6:10 talk of kneeling.

In Exodus 34:8-9 bowing is mentioned.

Ezekiel 9:8 and Matthew 26:39 there is lying face down.

Psalm 28:2 and I Timothy 2:8 mention praying with uplifted hands.

John 11:41 and 17:1 speaks of praying while looking up.

Luke 18:13, our passage, prayer was done while looking down.

Praying while standing is a perfectly acceptable posture for prayer, but doing so to be noticed by others is not.

Matthew 6:5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men."

His was a posture of conceit.

Second, notice his position.

b. His position

Right away we see what he prayed about. He prayed about himself. He pats himself on the back for being such a wonderful person. There was no shortage of praise about himself, with an inflated ego the size of all outdoors. He was totally in love with himself. When I was in college I had a roommate who would sing while he was getting ready. Standing in front of the mirror combing his hair he would sing "I think I love me."

The prayer of the Pharisee is totally one of conceit. Notice how he waxed on about himself. "I'm not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers"

I find it interesting that he only named those sins. Maybe he couldn't name others because he would incriminate himself. Is it coincidence or significant?

His was a resume' of self-satisfaction and pious living for which he was extremely proud.

Maybe he was absent from class the day they went over Isaiah 64:6 "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags..."

Perhaps he was daydreaming when they went over Psalm 143:2 "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you."

Or consider carefully Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is desperately wicked above all else, who can know it."

Job 25:4 asks a very pointed question – "How then can man be righteous before God?"

Paul in writing to the Romans reminds us that "There is none righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:10)

This Pharisee compared himself with others of sordid reputation and concluded that compared to them he was standing pretty tall in God's opinion. His was a prayer of comparison and when you compare yourself to others like that you are always going to come out on top. He compared himself with others, even the lowest of the low – a tax collector. Anyone was better than a tax collector. "Lord, I'm really glad I'm not like that outcast. What a loser."

Let's be careful that in our prayers we don't get caught comparing ourselves with someone else. It can be easy to do. We need to remember that there is only one standard by which we can and will be judged and according to it, we all fall short.

We have seen his posture and his position, notice his practice, which he things is pleasing to God.

c. His practice

"I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

The law only required fasting one day a year and that was on the Day of Atonement. That was the day they brought their animal sacrifice to the Temple to atone for sin. Who knows how extra days got added. Remember, I said they were all about tradition. Tradition trumped law. They fasted Mondays and Thursdays and they did it to be seen by men. In the Sermon of the Mount Jesus said they would disfigure their face to look somber so that people would see them fasting. They even powdered their face to appear more pale and sullen.

He fasted and he tithed. He tithed on all he received. That seems quite honorable, but notice he only tithed what was required. He never gave more.

He is the epitome of the religious and his prayer is the prayer of someone who is self-righteous. In our prayers, does that describe us?

On the one hand Jesus' parable described the prayer of the religious. Then He described the prayer of the repentant.

B. The Repentant Prayer – v. 13

1. It was humble
2. It was honest
3. It was heartfelt

He was at a distance from the Pharisee in the outer court. He couldn't go into the Temple, but he could go into the courtyard. We see that he also stood, but in humility he couldn't even look up. It was a sign of his remorse. His posture shows his heart. It shows that he doesn't even consider himself worthy to come into the presence of God with his request.

When our dog knows she has done something wrong, she will hang her head and won't even look up at me.

The tax collector was acutely aware of his position and standing with God. He was not a saint, he was a sinner. He knew it and he acknowledged it. His standard of comparison was not others, his standard was the only standard by which we will be measured. He knew God was the standard.

H.A. Ironside says "he was conscious of his own sinfulness."

The only thing he could pray was to ask God to have mercy on him as a sinner.

Charles Spurgeon wrote "True prayer is measured by weight, not by length. A single groan before God may have more fullness of prayer in it than a fine oration of great length."

John Bunyan, author of Pilgrim's Progress wrote "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart."

We often hear people offer their prayers when some terrible event occurs. I don't know if the people making those statements are actually Christians or not. Let's say they aren't. Does God hear their prayers on behalf of someone else's misfortune? Here's what I believe. I believe that there is only one prayer that God hears from the lips of an unbeliever and it is the prayer offered by the tax collector. God hears the prayer of repentance, not the prayers of the religious.

His prayer was humble. He knew who he was in relation to God.

His prayer was honest. He acknowledged that he was a sinner in need of mercy. He was so filled with remorse our text tells us he beat his chest. In the Greek it is an imperfect active meaning he kept on doing it. Beating one's chest was a sign

recognizing that sin begins in the heart. He was so overwrought about his sin it's like saying he kept pleading for the mercy of God.

His prayer was heartfelt. He was sincere in coming to the only person through whom or by whom he could receive mercy. The religious Pharisee thought his own righteousness merited favor with God. The repentant publican knew he had no righteousness of his own and merited nothing from God except what God would grant him.

Now, I want to pause there and talk about that word mercy. The tax collector is not asking God for pity. He didn't want God just to feel sorry for him. He was asking God for some action on his part. Here's what he was asking God for. Mercy is a word that means to be propitiated, or to become favorably inclined. Even though he was despised and disdained by fellow Jews, he had been raised to understand the Law and the Old Testament sacrificial system.

As a Jew he had been taught that the Ark of the Covenant was the place they received mercy. The lid of the Ark was referred to as the Mercy Seat. It was there on the lid that the blood of the animal sacrifice was sprinkled in order for the one seeking atonement would receive God's mercy. Without the blood there was no mercy and the Mercy Seat became instead a judgment seat.

God's holiness demands punishment for sin. Through His love He sent His Son to make substitutionary atonement for the believer's sin. By this sacrifice God's wrath was propitiated or satisfied. Propitiation means the turning away of wrath by a sacrifice. His wrath was turned from the sinner and was directed at Christ who bore our sin as our sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Christ has worldwide implication for any and all who will accept it. His sacrifice was on our behalf to turn away God's wrath from those

who will believe in Him. His atonement is received by faith. His mercy is received by faith. It is not by our own righteousness as the Pharisee thought, but by the mercy of God who does not give us what we deserve when we call out for His mercy. The tax collector didn't plead good works, but God's mercy. Ephesians 2:8-9
Titus 3:5

One of my favorite verses is Lamentations 3:22-23. "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness."

Psalm 86:3-7

When he asked for God's mercy, the tax collector was literally saying "Be toward me as You are when You look on the atoning blood." He asked God for what he knew he did not deserve, but only what God could give. He was calling on the mercy of God and by faith claiming the promise of God for forgiveness for his sin.

Martin Luther writes "When I learned that the righteousness of God is His mercy, and that He makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction." He came to understand the same truth that "the just or righteous live by faith. John MacArthur adds about Luther's understanding of the gospel that "he came to realize that God's righteousness, revealed in the gospel, is reckoned in full to the account of everyone who turns to Christ in repentant faith. God's own righteousness thus becomes the ground on which believers stand before Him."

Mercy then is God's action toward us who are contrite of heart, seeking the only means of forgiveness through the shed blood of Christ so that we find mercy and forgiveness.

So the next time you sin or are tempted to sin,

remember that Christ died for that sin. Paul then asks "should we continue any longer in it?"

There are two opposing people who offer two entirely different prayers. The result is two opposite and eternally different paths.

III. Two Opposite Paths – v. 14

A. The Judged

The Pharisee was deluded about himself. The Pharisee was deluded about his standing. The Pharisee was deluded about his sin.

He had failed to comprehend the prophetic word of Isaiah 53:6 stating that the Messiah would come and bear on himself our sin that through Him we are healed. We can only stand in His righteousness, not our own.

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that if we do not have the Son we do not have life. If we do not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ who suffered and died shedding His blood for us, atoning for our sin, becoming the sacrifice required for our sin, then we will perish, we will be judged.

But Jesus also speaks about the justified.

B. The Justified

"I tell you" is a way of Jesus asserting His divine authority. Others might look at the deeds of the religious Pharisees and conclude that surely they will make heaven.

John Newton said when he got to heaven he would be surprised by those he didn't see there and surprised by those he did see there, but most of all surprised that he was there. "Be merciful to me a sinner."

Jesus acknowledged that the tax collector was the

one who went away justified. It's a word that means God had made the person righteous, not on account of the person's goodness, but because he has been given the righteousness of Christ. It is just as if I had not sinned. God has forgiven our sin on account of Christ's finished work on the cross and the assurance of God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice of shed blood is the fact of His resurrection.

By Christ's shed blood and our faith we have been declared righteous by God. God's mercy made it possible. Have you called out for God to have mercy on you as a sinner?

Let me ask you again the same question I posed at the beginning of the message: Would you describe yourself as religious or repentant?

The prayer God hears is humble, honest, and heartfelt. Sarah is going to lead us in a couple songs before we come to the communion table. Now would be a good time to offer a prayer of repentance not the prayer of the religious.

The Lord is coming soon and the best way to prepare for His return is to make sure you have prayed the same prayer offered by the publican. That prayer assures your being justified. Without it there is only judgment.

One prayer was received.

One prayer was rejected.