

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

It is written in the book of Proverbs: “Most men will proclaim his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find” (Prov. 20:6). This principle is exemplified in the parable before us: there was a Pharisee who prayed with himself, extolling his perceived virtues, and a Publican who recognised his sinfulness, and threw himself upon the mercy of his God. The one proclaimed his own goodness, the other was justified by his faith.

The parable was given in the first instance, to “certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Lu. 18:9). It was designed to demonstrate the folly of self-righteousness, and the importance of taking hold upon the mercy of God extended toward repentant sinners. The despising of others is a characteristic of those who seek to exalt themselves. This can be seen in the business world around us: men and women elevate themselves by trampling down others on their journey. Such is not the way of the disciple of Christ, however. In Romans chapter 14, the Apostle brings things to their proper perspective:

“But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, as I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God: (Rom. 14:10-12).

In the parable we are considering, both men were giving an account of themselves before God. One set at nought a man who he didn't even recognise as his brother, by proclaiming his own virtues. The other gave a confession to God. The point being, that we ought not judge one another, and despise the weakness of our brother, for we shall all stand before the coming judgment seat of Christ. In a similar vein, Messiah taught:

“Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their Angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Mat. 18:10).

Each one of the heirs of Salvation have angels as ministering spirits, tending to their needs (see Heb. 1:14). Those angels appear in the Divine Presence – would we want them to give a bad report of our attitude towards them?

In proclaiming his virtues, the Pharisee began by congratulating himself on how he fasted regularly: “I fast twice in the week ...”. But whilst he thought that by doing this, he would be considered righteous, it is worth considering that with one exception, fasting was not a commandment of God. That exception was the Day of Atonement, and the true fast that the Lord required was this:

“Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?” (Isa. 58:6-7).

This is the true spirit of fasting, of which the literal abstention of food was but a token. The principle is that in abstaining from temporal pleasures, there would be provision to provide for the poor and needy. For instance, in not eating, the usual daily food would not be used up – it was therefore to be given to the poor. The Pharisee in the parable did not do this: he fasted beyond what the law required to make himself look good, and had no thought to providing for the benefit of others. He therefore missed the whole point of fasting. The next boast of the Pharisee was this: “I give tithes of all that I possess”. His fellow Pharisees were rebuked elsewhere for this very point:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the Law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done and not to leave the other undone” (Mat. 23:23).

Again, the whole point of the giving of Tithes was to make provision for those who would otherwise have nothing (see Deut. 14:28, 26:12). It also provided for the Levites, who had no land inheritance, to sustain them – so that in turn, they would keep the tabernacle/temple system of worship going. But helping those who had nothing was far from the mind of the Pharisee – he used it solely in order to make himself feel and look good.

In his prayer, the Pharisee spoke only about himself, and how good he thought himself to be: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican” (Lu. 18:11). By marked contrast, in his model prayer for his disciples to use, God is praised first, before anything else: “After this manner therefor pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven” (Mat. 6:9-10). Notice the priority: the Pharisee’s prayer was all about himself, the Master’s model prayer was all about the glorification of God. As the Psalmist has it:

“Praise ye Yahweh, Praise ye the Name of Yahweh: praise him O ye servants of Yahweh. Ye that stand in the house of Yahweh, in the courts of the house of our God, Praise Yahweh: for Yahweh is good: sing praises unto his Name for it is pleasant” (Psa 135:1-3).

What a contrast this is to the Pharisee who stood in the house of Yahweh! Instead of praising his God, for His Goodness, he instead sought to justify himself by presenting his own goodness! Jesus himself rebuked the Jewish leaders: “ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God” (Lu. 16:15).

Again, Solomon spoke of this spirit of self-indulgence: “Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth ...” (Prov. 27:2). Ultimately, the faithful do not require or desire the praise of men: “he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter: whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:29).

The Publican, however, did not attempt to justify himself. He rather was to ashamed to even lift up his head to heaven: “the publican standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his

eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lu. 18:13).

His posture is reminiscent of that of holy men of old. Ezra prayed thus:

“O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God; for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (Ezra 9:6).

Again, David wrote:

“For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me. Be pleased, O Yahweh, to deliver me: O Yahweh, make haste to help me” (Psa. 40:12-13).

And again, words which match the sentiments of the Publican:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness : according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions ... the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psa. 51:1, 17).

Rather than to boast when we do those things which we are commanded to do, we must recognise our rightful position before God: “So likewise ye, when ye have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do” (Lu. 17:10).

Returning to the parable we are considering, it is said of the Publican: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Lu. 18:14). There is a principle of Scripture that no man can justify himself by works. There is “none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10), saith the Scripture. The Pharisee, despite all his self-proclaimed righteousness was yet dead in his trespasses and sins. Yet the Publican – a self-confessed sinner, was counted as righteous by the Master. Here is the principle:

“... if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God ... now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works. Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered ...” (Rom. 4:1-8).

Men can only be considered righteous if they recognise their own position before Almighty God: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly ... But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, whilst we were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:see verses 1-8).

The way of salvation as ordained by God himself is not for the glorification of man:

“base things of the world, and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence” (Rom. 1:28-29).

This is what the Pharisee sought to do: to despise those who God would save through faith. He gloried in himself before the presence of God, and sought his own honour, and not that of the Almighty.

Righteousness therefore, is a gift:

“Who shall ascend into the hill of Yahweh? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. **He shall receive** the blessing from Yahweh, **and righteousness from the God of his salvation**” (Psa. 24:3-5).

Notice, righteousness is not received by those who lift up their soul unto vanity, like the Pharisee. Again, Paul spoke of his hope to Timothy, his son in the faith:

“ ... I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me **a crown of righteousness**, which the Lord, the righteous judge, **shall give me** at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (1 Tim. 4:7-8)

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican therefore, we have an example of self-elevation and pride in one’s own perceived virtues. And we have another example of humility, and trust in the power of Yahweh to save. It is clear which category we need to emulate: we look forward to being justified not by our own words, but by faith in the promises of God. Then, we will go forth being justified, rather than the other.

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