



Luke 18:9-14

9 Jesus spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else. 10 'Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, "I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. 12 I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get." 13 The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." 14 This man, I tell you, went home again at rights with God; the other did not. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the man who humbles himself will be exalted.'

Other readings: Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14,16-19 Psalm 33 (34) 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

This is another of those wonderful parables which are only recorded in the Gospel of Luke. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, rather like the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, describes a stark contrast.

Jesus gives a caricature of a Pharisee who is inordinately proud of his achievements, one who completes all that the Law requires, and far more besides. Jesus describes the Pharisee as praying 'to himself'. This could simply mean that he was praying softly, but it seems also to suggest that the prayers of this man can never reach God. They are simply an expression of his pride and self-obsession, which is accompanied by a judgemental attitude to others.

We should be careful not to extend this negative portrayal of one Pharisees to all Pharisees, as has often been done in interpreting the gospels, for many members of this religious group were exemplary in their attitudes and conduct.

The tax-collector recognises his need of forgiveness. The gospels are full of references to tax-collectors, who were often dishonest, and sought the company of Jesus along with other 'sinners' (as in Luke 15:1). This man is deeply conscious of his need for God. He stands far off because he recognises that the God of holiness is to be found in the Temple, and he feels unworthy to come closer. He is a man of genuine faith and he beats his breast in an honest expression of his need.

'Justification', being 'at rights with God', is not a result of our own efforts to accumulate good deeds, but comes as a free gift to those who acknowledge their sinfulness and believe in the forgiveness Christ offers.

Are my efforts to do good an attempt to win God over, or an expression of love for the God who forgives me?

Do I pray as my heart directs me, or as I imagine I should?

Let us pray for those who are desperate to please God.

Let us pray for the faith which acknowledges the need of forgiveness.