

Pharisee and publican

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Principal Clement Graham

[0 : 00] ...to the scripture we read in the Gospel according to Luke chapter 18. We can read again at verse 10, introducing as it does a well-known parable of our Lord.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.

And 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.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. People often found that the Lord Jesus Christ was a most uncomfortable companion.

Because so many of his statements and judgments were not in accordance with the accepted conventions of the time, but in accordance with the inner truth of things which he perceived inherently.

[1 : 19] There was, for example, a common preservation, indeed a deep-seated conviction amongst the Jewish people, that just to be a son of Abraham, to be a descendant of the Father of Covenant, this was enough to guarantee a man a place of favor in the sight of God.

Wrong, said Jesus. It is not so. He said it to one of the chief leaders of the people, one who was, no doubt, himself meticulous in his observance of the law of Moses, and persuaded that, as such, he had a place of favor in God's sight.

Wrong, said Jesus. You've got to go right back to the beginning. You've got to start all over again. You've got to make a new beginning.

To put it briefly and vividly, you must be born again. It's no wonder that the man who had come to inquire stumbled and fumbled and was confused.

This wasn't the turn that he had expected the conversation to take. There was, also another example, there was a deep-seated conviction among people that wherever there were, what we would call natural calamities.

[3 : 06] These represented the judgment of God upon the guilt of the victims. Wrong again, said Jesus. If there is judgment of God, it is not to be associated directly and exclusively with the victims of these tragedies, but as notice served upon every unrepentant sin.

Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish. There was a deep-seated persuasion among the people that a Jew was always better than a Samaritan.

Again, Jesus tells them, you're wrong. And he told them the story of a man who fell among thieves and was passed by by a Jewish priest and Levite and helped by a Samaritan.

more specifically, before us here, in the parable which our Lord spoke to those who trusted that they were righteous and despised others, we have a Pharisee and a publican.

And there would be a widespread conviction that the Pharisee must be a better man than the publican. He was served the word of a people and a sect in the community who had proved themselves zealous to the law of God.

[4 : 48] Who proved themselves patriotic. Who were sensed by the fact that the land of Israel was dominated by an invader, by a foreign invader.

The publican on the other hand had sold himself to serve the foreign invader. He must be.

He couldn't possibly be as good a man as the Pharisee. Well, says Jesus, let us look at these men in their relationship to God.

For that's what matters. what is fundamental, what is crucial, is the relation that each of them sustains toward God, the God with whom we all have to do.

And we want to examine these two men in their relationship with God. Look at them and listen to them if you can while we speak to God.

[5 : 54] When we come near to God in the professed act of prayer, you see what they think of God, what they think of themselves, what they expect out of the encounter.

And that's how Jesus tells us the story of the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the temple to pray. What we have here are two representative people.

And we have to think of them not just as figures of the past, not just to think of them in terms of the situation in which each of them is presented in the temple in Jerusalem, but to see of them as representative people like us.

And our inquiry must be as to in which of them we see our own likeness. Of course, we're all drawing ourselves up, and perhaps at the very suggestion of that, we're drawing ourselves up with a certain amount of pride and saying, well, you're not going to classify me with the publican, that's for sure, and you're not going to classify me with this proud Pharisee.

I don't belong to either category. well, let's see. What I want to do, just for a short time, to look at the matter as simply as possible, is to look at the experience of these two representative men, paying attention to what each of them saw and what each of them did, what the Pharisee saw and what he did and what the publican saw and what he did.

[7 : 49] Of course, we have to think of the Pharisee first. He'd never forgive us if we thought of the other fellow before him. Well, we ask ourselves, what did the Pharisee see when he went up into the temple to pray?

He saw a world of sinners, a world full of spectacular sinners, a world full of rogues and scoundrels and cheats and liars.

That's what he saw. Men abusing the position of influence, oppressing the poor, proving themselves to be extortionist, taking what was not due to them, cheating on their neighbors, cheating on their wives, going about with other women, some of them, adulterous, extortionist, unjust.

a world full of scoundrels and cheats. Well, is the world like that?

And you may say, well, of course, the world is like that, and it's not good any better. There are lots and lots of people, in fact, the majority of people just behave like that.

[9 : 31] What was wrong with the Pharisee seeing it that way? Except this, that the Pharisee saw the world as distinct from himself.

He saw the wickedness of the world as belonging to all those out there, all those out there. They were the wicked ones, they were the unjust, the adulterers, the extortioners, the people whose very existence he deplored in the presence of God.

But he was not like them. You see, this Pharisee saw not only a world full of spectacular sinners, but he saw striking exception.

exception. There was one who was better than any of them, who wasn't to be involved, who wasn't a fellow conspirator of those cheats and liars, different, very glad to be different, striking and singular exception.

And he was pleased with the singularity exception. In the time when Elijah thought he was the only odd one, that he was the only believer in God, the only follower of God, it was a source of great distress to him.

[11 : 11] He was so distressed by it that he thought that it would be better that God should take him out of the world altogether. It's enough, he said. I only am left. And it was a cause of heartbreak to him.

But you don't get any sense of heartbreak with this Pharisee. It ain't got any sense of mourning, a man who is broken down with grief because of what he has seen.

Rather, he's rather pleased with the difference between one and himself. Those out there and me in here, I'm so different and I feel so great about being different.

He saw a singular exception and he was pleased with the religious punctiliousness of that striking exception.

He was so meticulous about the observance of the little details of the law. In fact, it might seem as though sometimes he was giving a bonus to God, fasting more often than the law would require, fasting twice in the week and giving tithes of all that he possessed.

[12 : 36] And then he was pleased with the obviousness of the exception. I think indeed he almost had a sense of indebtedness to this publican publican.

Because the publican acted as such a foal, the blackness and darkness of this publican's life showed up with brilliance and the purity that the Pharisee claimed for himself.

I thank thee that I am not as other men, nor even as this publican. that's what the Pharisee saw, a world full of wickedness and a singular exception.

But we should notice in passing that there was what the Pharisee didn't see. The Pharisee didn't see God.

Yes, in a way, he saw his God. He didn't see the living and true God display. He didn't see the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.

[13 : 48] He didn't see the God of splendid majesty and the God of infinite grace and compassion. He saw God, but the God he saw was in his own shape and his own size.

He needed a God of himself. Indeed, our Lord seems to indicate this when he says that the Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.

He wasn't really holding a conversation with God. He wasn't speaking to God. He didn't have an encounter with God. He was holding a soliloquy.

He was talking to himself. He didn't know the God, the splendor of his presence reduces all the virtues of the best of men to filthy rags.

But he saw himself, not for him, Daniel's all-inclusive prayer to us, to our kings, to our princes, to every one of us, belongs shame and confusion of face.

[15 : 01] that's not his mood, that's not his way of looking at things, because he hasn't seen the real God there is.

The trouble with this Pharisee, the trouble with this Pharisee was he couldn't look up.

He could look down. He could look down in the rest of humanity he might even look across, look out, but he couldn't look up.

He had a trouble that no physiotherapist could put right. The muscles of his neck were such that he couldn't look up. He couldn't look at the brilliance, he couldn't look at the glory of the living God.

And I think he'd have had to break his neck to make him look up and see the God that is things.

Now, what did the Pharisee do?

[16 : 08] The short answer indeed was that he did nothing. He went up there to the temple and he went through this commendatory, this self congratulatory address and he felt good.

good. He had a warm glow within him. There was a vast difference between feeling good and being good. This Pharisee felt good.

He felt he ought to be commended. He had engaged in his normal exercises, his normal spiritual exercise. But as I said already, he had such a stiff neck that no exercises could cure that.

He couldn't look up. That's what the Pharisee got. Just the sense of self-satisfaction, an empty sense of self-complacency.

He went out feeling that he had done something worthy, that he had done something worthwhile, but it hadn't made one iota of difference to the way that he lived, to the way that he looked out on reality, to how he behaved toward his fellow man.

[17 : 38] Now let's look at him and ask ourselves whether we see in him any likeness to ourselves. we come to the house of God, we listen to the word, maybe we feel we feel we've done a worthy thing in coming to God's house, done a worthy thing in coming particularly on a weeknight, coming to the house of God to study the scriptures, to pray, but what we have to ask ourselves is, has it made and does it make and does it coming regularly to the house of God make any difference to the way that we live, to the concept that we have of a God in whose presence we are, or to how we behave toward our fellow man?

What's the difference? And what's the difference between us and those who do not behave after our religious pattern? In practical terms, in terms of practical righteousness, and in terms of practical compassion toward those in need, what's the difference?

Look at it again. Each one of us must judge, and maybe some of us are afraid of how like that Pharisee we are.

And then, the publican, what did the publican see? The publican saw God in reality of his holy majesty.

He saw God in the reality of his holy majesty. a vision that's overwhelming, a vision that shrivels up any sense of virtue that a man has of himself.

[19 : 53] Isaiah had a vision of this. I saw the Lord, he said, high, and lifted up his glory filled the temple. And I said, yes, for I am undone, a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

John, the beloved disciple, had a vision like this. He saw the glory of the risen Christ. He saw the splendor of the person of the risen Christ, and though he was the beloved disciple, he tells us that the vision was such that when I saw him, I saw that his feet is dead.

In what experience God is recognized as the ultimately only one who matters. God is the ultimate reality.

God is the ultimate judge. God is the one with whom we have to do. And it doesn't matter what people say. It doesn't matter what the world out there is thinking and doing in one sense.

But we are face to face with a God in whose hand our breath is. The Pharisees saw God in the reality of his holy majesty.

[21 : 24] And the Pharisees saw God in his eyes entitled to be enraged. He saw and recognized God as entitled to be enraged.

And enraged toward him. Now it's possible for people to listen and to hear expounded the doctrine of the justice and righteousness of God.

It's possible for them to listen to the proclamation of the wrath of God as revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men who hold down the truth and unrighteousness. To listen to that proclamation and that exposition I need to listen to it, to listen and to be never told a start by it.

I'm because there is no unrighteous corroboration. It's one thing for the proclamation for the exposition of the justice and righteousness of God.

[22 : 39] It's one thing for the exposition of the righteousness of God to strike ideas. It's another thing altogether to listen to this when there is an unrighteous corroboration when you know that that just God has a controversy with me when I hear and I know that this wrath that is being proclaimed is not the wrath of God simply upon an anonymous world but that it is the wrath of God that I have merited that my sin has deserved that my iniquity has brought about when I see it that way when there is that anger corroboration when I know that I cannot stand I cannot abide the presence of this God and this is what this publican experienced he knew

God was entitled to be unraged against him Job had made a corroboration had made a statement of this sort I have heard of thee with a hearing of the ear and how many of us are but the hearing God in that way I have heard of thee with a hearing of the ear but now mine eyes seeth the wherefore I abhor myself in dust and ashes he saw God in the reality of his holy majesty he saw God in his entitlement to be enraged against him but this man also saw God willing to be propitiated he heard the first notes at least he heard the first notes of the message of grace it wasn't just the vision of justice of the just

God for the recognition the proclamation of justice often elicits only a reaction of defiance we begin to search around to make excuses to defend ourselves to mitigate our guilt and there's nothing dies so hard in the human heart as the sense of personal righteousness and the feeling that when we are condemned we are condemned because we are not understood we are condemned not because of the wickedness that we have committed but because people haven't understood the vision of justice may just cause a reaction of defiance but when it's a vision of the God of justice who is also the God of grace a

God who is willing to be propitiated when we know God was a just God and a savior now that's when our reaction is different then it's not to self excuse and self justification and defiance when we begin to hang our heads in shame we are covered with shame and with grief I said earlier that the Pharisee couldn't look up because he had a stiff neck this man couldn't look up because he hung his head in shame and grief the shame and grief that make us unable to look up and then you ask how then did he see God this man who couldn't so much as lift up his eyes to heaven whose eyes were full of tears who smote upon his breast who couldn't who wanted if possible to hide himself from everybody's sight how did he see God how does a man hang his head in shame and grief see God you know there is a precious word of God a precious word with regard with regard to God and how in the coming glory

God will wipe away all tears from all eyes a man doesn't like to be seen with tears in his eyes it's embarrassing he doesn't like to be seen like that and how does God wipe away how can you wipe away tears from anybody's eyes you mothers you fathers how do you wipe away tears from the little

boys the little girls eyes when they come with some distress I'll tell you two things you have to you have to get very close to them and you have to be very gentle with them and that's how God deals with the penitent that is how this man found God when he couldn't but hang his head and shame and grief and wish to hide himself that's when he discovered the gentleness of God that's when he knew the reality of grace when he knew that

[28 : 45] God is willing to be propitiated he saw he saw God not only in the austerity and severity of his justice but he saw God in the gentleness and generosity and compassion of his grace as a God who understood and the God who was willing to be propitiated in terms of the prayer that he offered God be propitiated to me the sinner he saw God and he saw himself and he saw himself as he had never seen himself before he saw himself with all his defenses down he saw himself no longer concerned to meet up with the accusations that people brought against him he had no refuge he had no place to hide himself he was exposed before God and he couldn't hide from God but he couldn't lift up his eyes to God he saw

God in the riches of his grace and he saw himself in the wretchedness of his sin and guilt and we ask what did the publican do well the publican as we have seen saw one sinner what was the one he saw one sinner in the world he praised God be propitiated to me this sinner as if he were and for the moment in his estimation there was but one sinner standing before God as one day we shall all stand naked and exposed not hiding ourselves in the crowd not gaining the anonymity that the crowd will give to us but standing naked and exposed and individuated before God he saw a sinner and you know what he did he prayed for the sinner he knew he prayed for the sinner he knew and if a man won't pray for the sinner he knows how can he pray for those he doesn't know there's one sinner you know better than you know any other there's one sinner I know better than

I know any other and if I don't pray for that sinner I can't pray for any other if you don't pray for the sinner you know best of all you can't pray it's idle for you to try to pray for any other he prayed for the sinner he knew he went directly to God he went directly to the God he had offended he went he went directly to the God whose message of grace he had heard who was willing to be propitiated he let nothing stand between indeed he stood afar off he didn't feel worthy to be where he was he didn't feel worthy to call upon the God upon whom he called God but he went directly to God all the same he unburdened himself to God he left all to God no bargaining but just the plea of his own need his plea to divine mercy to divine grace here I stand in my need

I have nothing to offer he makes no offer he makes no bargain but just casts himself upon God's mercy I am a poor sinner as man said I am a poor sinner and nothing at all but Jesus Christ is my all in all and what he got what he got was God's pardon and God's peace God was propitiated God justified he was justified through the grace of the Redeemer and this is the gospel that is preached to every one of us there is a way of access to God there is a way in which we can come to God and lay the plea of our hearts in the honesty of inner conviction that we have sinned grievously against

God lay ourselves in our need at his footstool and know his mercy God be propitiated to me the sinner are they not are we not all in need of uttering this prayer this is where prayer begins I don't say this is where it ends you know prayer prayer is something like the mountain of the eagle it begins it is said to go in circles and in ever greater circles and so it will see a greater and greater expanse you start to pray when you start to pray for one sinner you start to pray when you start to pray for the one sinner you know it was said of Saul of Tarsus behold he prays many so called prayer

[34 : 54] Paul had gone through the formula of prayers many a time before but this time he prayed and this is what we've got to learn there comes a point where no one but no one can be of any help to us there's a burden of sin and guilt upon our consciences that no psychologist no psychiatrist can relieve us of no friend can ease us off there's a burden of sin and guilt upon the conscience that only God the stain of guilt that only God can cleanse away you know it you have the inner corroboration in the conscience that bears testimony excusing or else accusing there's only one thing for the sinner to do come before the throne of God with the sinner's prayer God be propitiated to me the sinner let us pray oh lord our god infinite in goodness and loving kindness intended in mercy thou art he who knows how to bind up the broken hearted thou art he to whom we may return saying he hath smitten and he will heal us he hath broken and he will bind us up may we know the goodness of thy discipline of the very bones which thou hast broken may rejoice in

Jesus name Amen Amen