



Worthy?

God welcomes those who approach Him in humble and simple faith.

LUKE 18:9-17

When we look in a mirror, our adjustments begin. The mirror gives us a clearer picture of who we are. The same is true of the Bible.

We don't just read the Bible, the Bible often reads us. By nature, we are prone to view ourselves more highly than we ought. Real faith is demonstrated in and through humility. God welcomes those who approach Him in humble and simple faith.

How does the image we see in a mirror encourage us and discourage us at the same time?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

LUKE 17:1–18:30

Throughout Luke 17:1–18:30, Jesus taught about discipleship and the kingdom of God, in many places with parables. The audience of the parable in 18:9-14 is identified as those who were convinced of their own righteousness. Like we saw in the parable of the prodigal son (15:11-32), the religious leaders (likened to the older brother) often had trouble accepting the fact that God shows grace to the unrighteous. Pride makes grace difficult to accept. With this in mind, the Pharisees were the primary target of Jesus' teaching in this week's passage.

As it will become clear in our parable, Pharisees regularly looked down on people who did not, in their estimation, come close to fulfilling the strict requirements of the law. This is one reason Jesus enraged them. Jesus not only spent time with the unrighteous and broken, He also extended them grace. For the self-righteous, God's grace is scandalous. This parable reminds us that God welcomes all people. He lifts up the humble. While the outer appearances of the religious leaders made them look like they were right with God, Jesus made clear that was not the case.

Jesus cares for those who are often deemed insignificant. God is not coerced by deeds or by man-made measures of importance that tip the scales in people's minds. This paradigm sets us up to understand how the next few scenes in Luke's Gospel should be interpreted. The rich young ruler (18:18-30), the blind man (18:35-43), and Zacchaeus are examples of either recipients or rejecters of the kingdom of God. We see a growing picture of how the kingdom of God operates.

Read Luke 18:9-17, looking for insight into the true nature of the kingdom of God. What does this passage teach about how a person enters the kingdom?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

RELIGIOUS PRIDE (LUKE 18:9-12)

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee was standing and praying like this about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’

VERSES 9-12

We are explicitly told that this *parable* was directed at those who **trusted in** their own ability to obtain righteousness and who arrogantly **looked down on** others. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable actually thought he was better than them. This is what all self-righteous people do, isn’t it? They bolster their own sense of righteousness by comparing themselves to others. They make themselves feel better by putting down people who aren’t as “righteous” as they are. Scripture makes it clear that God rejects the proud (Jas. 4:6,10; 1 Pet. 5:5).

This is precisely the purpose of the parable—to warn those who self-righteously look at others with contempt. To accomplish this end, Jesus told a parable about **two men**, the first of whom was **a Pharisee** who prayed with righteous arrogance and viewed himself as worthy of God’s recognition. Note the wording of verse 11, the Pharisee was praying **about himself**. He was not thanking God for His grace and mercy; he was thanking God for his own self-righteousness. He was parading his good deeds before others, as if that made him more worthy of God’s love.

How does trusting in one’s self lead to contempt for others?

The Pharisee exalted himself by comparison. It’s important to note that the Pharisee compared himself to **a tax collector**. Jesus’

usage of a tax collector in this parable was a powerful way to get His point across. Tax collectors were loathed because of their perceived greed and relationship with Rome. As Jesus' story makes clear, they were considered unrighteous and adulterous. The Pharisees on the other hand, were highly regarded as model religious citizens.

The Pharisee exalted himself by listing his commendable religious accomplishments. Not only did he tithe from everything he received, he also fasted **twice a week**. If you compare the religious deeds of the Pharisee to the unrighteous deeds of the tax collector, you might assume that the Pharisee was more honorable than the other. But the opposite was true, as will be seen at the end of the parable.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jews were commanded to fast only one day a year, on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29; 23:27).

Any religious person hearing the first few words of this parable would have commended the fictional Pharisee for his religious deeds. In fact, they would have immediately identified with this character; he depicted all they longed to be. But in just a few words to set the scene, Jesus surfaced the problem within the listener's hearts. By all external qualifications this Pharisee was a good man, but when you look at his prayer you see something very telling. His prayer was all about his accomplishments. Underneath the veneer of his God-talk and morality was adoration of self.

The religious leaders were known for their deeds and for their pride in justifying their own righteousness before others. Like all of us, however, deep down they must have known their inability to live up to God's perfect law. In many ways, their attempts to publicly prove their own righteousness were simple efforts to ease their internal guilt. The Scriptures teach that no one can be justified in God's sight by self-effort. Even believers must safeguard against religious pride because pride makes us blind to our need for grace.

What practices might a person point to today to announce their righteousness?

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare other passages for insight.*

Review passages that relate to prayer such as Numbers 16:22; Joshua 7:6; 1 Kings 8:54; Psalm 95:6;141:2; Daniel 6:10; Romans 14:11; and Philippians 2:10. What does the posture in each passage reveal about the attitude expressed toward God?

GODLY HUMILITY (LUKE 18:13-14)

¹³ **“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes to heaven but kept striking his chest and saying, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner!’** ¹⁴ **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.”**

VERSE 13

The second character in the story was a **tax collector**. The Pharisee and the tax collector could not have been more different in people’s perception, or in their internal posture toward God. While the Pharisee utilized his public prayers to praise himself before others, the tax collector’s prayers were a plea for God’s grace.

In Scripture, lifting up one’s **eyes to heaven** is often depicted as a normal posture for prayer (Ps. 123:1; Mark 6:41). But in this parable

the tax collector did not lift up his eyes because of his awareness of shame. In fact, he was so overwhelmed by his own guilt he beat **his chest** in despair.

The text in verse 13 literally reads, “God have mercy on me *the sinner*.” The Pharisee primarily thought of sin externally and comparatively. If we approach sin this way, there will always be someone who sins more than us, so we will never truly feel the weight of our sinfulness. The self-righteous can always look down on others. However, the tax collector actually had a more accurate view of himself. He was saying, “I am lost, and where everyone else is morally does not affect my lostness.” The tax collector was not focusing on his actions but the root of those actions. He was a sinner, period.

How does honest confession of sin open the door to God’s forgiveness?

The tax collector had done nothing to earn God’s justification. And that is precisely the point.

VERSE 14

Jesus said that the tax collector went home **justified** before God. Justification is a legal term and is the opposite of condemnation. To condemn others is to declare them guilty; to justify others is to declare them righteous. In Scripture, the term *justification* is used to describe God’s expression of unmerited favor by which He puts sinners right with Himself—not only pardoning them but accepting them and treating them as righteous. For Jesus to declare the tax collector justified would have enraged the religious leaders. For them, the tax collector had done nothing to earn God’s justification. And that is precisely the point.

This parable gets to the heart of the gospel. The Pharisee was trying to justify himself by his good deeds. The tax collector knew he could not justify himself, cried out for God’s grace, and God justified him. While the Pharisee couldn’t see his need for grace because of his

self-righteous pride, the tax collector could see only his need. If we want God's grace, we must first see our need for His grace.

With this powerful parable, Jesus teaches us that the proud **will be humbled** and the humble **will be exalted**. What happened next demonstrates this point further. God desires a childlike faith from all who come to him.

How can a person's own perceived "goodness" get in the way of humbly confessing his or her sin to God?

CHILDLIKE FAITH (LUKE 18:15-17)

¹⁵ People were bringing infants to him so that he might touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ Jesus, however, invited them: "Let the little children come to me, and don't stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

VERSE 15

Again Jesus accepted the unlikely. Luke used the term **infants** and a word translated **little children** in reference to babies or those in early childhood. In that culture, children were often considered insignificant. This is why the disciples **rebuked** those who brought children for Jesus to bless and to pray for them. The disciples seem to have shared the culture's attitude toward children, who had little status in their world. On a deeper level, this reveals that the disciples thought only certain people were worthy of Jesus' time and attention.

VERSES 16-17

Jesus not only welcomed the children but encouraged them to be brought to Him. Once again, He welcomed the insignificant and overlooked. **The kingdom of God** belongs to those who are in need. The kingdom belongs to those who are like children, those who are valued little in society. Of all people, children are the most dependent.

They are as reliant on their parents for their sustenance as the tax collector was on God for mercy and grace.

God desires all of us to approach Him with humility—like the tax collector and with childlike faith. This type of dependence cannot coexist with pride. Small children, unlike most adults, realize they are dependent receivers. Furthermore, Jesus’ reception of children strikes down the assumption of the disciples that Jesus accepts only certain types of people who are worthy of His attention.

We are completely dependent on the grace of God.

All who desire to enter God’s kingdom must enter with a childlike humility and faith. Are we like these little children—humble, dependent, trusting? Just as children look toward their parents in dependence, trust, hope, and humility, God calls us to look to Him as our Father. We are completely dependent on the grace of God.

The good news is God is a good Father. In Christ we are given all of the riches of His kingdom and none of us deserve it. A tremendous cost was paid so that we could be adopted into God’s family and have the right to cry out to Him as our “Abba father.” May we never become ungrateful children. May we never approach our heavenly Father as though we deserve anything because of our merit. Let’s be honest about ourselves like the tax collector. Let us always come to God as a child would to loving parents.

How does the trust expressed by a child compare to the trust expressed by the tax collector in the parable?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (John 14:6).

APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers must safeguard against religious pride.
- Believers must confess their sins to the Father.
- God builds His kingdom on childlike trust and honesty.

Discuss as a group ways all people, even faithful Christians, are susceptible to religious pride. What are some practical ways that we can develop self-awareness to keep from becoming like the Pharisee in the parable?

Take some time to review the past seven days, looking for sins you have failed to confess to God. Write a prayer, confessing those sins to the Father.

How would you rate your trust and honesty in your prayers? What actions do you need to take to build that trust and to be more honest with God?

PRAYER NEEDS
