

Years ago, I bought an old 1974 Hilux. I always thought of it as old, because I was 5 when it was built. And it was about 20 years old by the time I bought it. (obviously on a tight budget...).

Anyway, one day I needed to change tie-rod end, which sort of has a tapered locking fitting, which are sometimes difficult to get apart, but I'd done it before... I knew that hitting the side of the arm it's in, it dislodges the taper, so I was right – I'd get it done... And about 3 hours later, I was at my wits-end. I had wriggled around under that ute, with hammers of all different sizes, and tapered cold chisels & drift-punches & little rail-way-iron anvils, and I couldn't do it...

So, I swallowed my pride, and I rang a friend who's a mechanic, and said, "How do you do it? I've done it before, but I just cannot get this one to budge." And he said "Come in and I'll loan you a tool." ... So I drove into town, and he handed me a little air chisel with a tapered fork on it and told me what to do. I went home, started the air compressor, wriggled under the car again; and "thrrrd" – Less than 2 seconds and the job was done...

Sometimes in life, it becomes obvious that we ourselves (no matter how competent we believe we are) , we realise that we are totally inadequate, and we need help.

So, let's talk about this from a spiritual perspective:
In my experience, an attitude of self-righteousness, is probably one of the biggest hindrances to the Gospel.

You see, if I am self-righteous, the Gospel itself, is an offence to me.

The Gospel tells me, that I am totally broken and sinful, and that I have a complete inability to save myself (I just cannot do it),,, and the **Good News** of the Gospel, is that through the cross of Jesus Christ, I can stop all of this vane “depending on myself” nonsense, and receive the mercy, grace and forgiveness, that God freely gives. The Lord is my **only** hope, and so I submit myself to Him, and cry out to Him for His mercy...

But of course, to the self-righteous, that message is utterly offensive. “*What do you mean, I’m a sinner – I’m not a bad person...*” Well, actually, yes you are. **Romans 3:23 (ESV) 23** **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** And if sin is the rejection of God, a self-righteous person – someone who continually rejects God (because “*I don’t need God*” ... “*I don’t need His forgiveness*”), ,, their rejection, makes them one of the worst of sinners.

So, self-righteousness, is a hindrance to salvation – it is a hindrance to getting saved. But it’s also a hindrance to “prayer”. And in today’s parable, Jesus not only gives us a lesson on “salvation”, but He also gives us a lesson on “prayer”.

James 5:16**The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**” Who is the “righteous man”? Well, James wrote those words in the context of us needing to humbly confess our sins, so that our sins are not going to impede our prayers.

And in today's reading, we see the difference between a humble prayer and a self-righteous prayer.

Righto, so let's look at the parable. Luke (once again), begins by telling us what the parable is about. : V ⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

Two blokes went up to the temple to pray. One of them was a Pharisee.

Now, we tend to think of the Pharisees as being "bad" because Jesus had lots of arguments with them. But they actually tried really hard, to be good (Most of them missed the point, but they were trying hard). These blokes really strove for holiness. And they were very particular, to not only **not break** God's laws, but to exceed them in righteousness. And we're going to see that come through in the parable.

So, the Pharisee: he is a picture of the most pious – the most devoutly committed to "good morals" and to the keeping of God's laws.

And the other bloke: he was a tax-collector.

No one likes paying taxes, do they? But in Israel, tax-collectors were the next-level of “scum-of-the-earth”. Why? Because they were collecting taxes on behalf of their enemy.

The Romans who occupied their land, contracted it out to the locals to gather in the taxes, so that they could then pay their troops, to **oppress** the locals... So, you can imagine how much these local tax-collectors were hated. *No self-respecting kid would go to a careers night and say, “Oh, I want to be a tax collector”*. The only reason people did it, was because they got paid a lot of money.

So, these 2 blokes went to the Temple to pray.

The Pharisee (standing by himself), prayed like this:

He sort of starts out with a prayer of thanksgiving (It’s good to give thanks to God for stuff, isn’t it)... But, the problem is, his prayer did not focus on giving thanks to God for His Sovereign work. His prayer focused on himself. His prayer reminds me of that song “*Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble, when you’re perfect in every way...*” ...

He said: **‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners (or thieves), unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.**

Can you believe it? He is so full of himself... Basically his prayer is saying, “Dear God, thank you that I am such a good bloke. Thank You that I’m not like other people.” He looks at those around him, and he comes to the opinion, “You don’t even know what righteousness is, but I am righteous”... He

fully trusted in himself, that he was righteous and that was his ticket to Heaven...

And then (just in case God hadn't noticed), he gives God a couple of examples of his righteous acts: ¹² **I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'**

Wow! That far exceeded the Old Testament requirements. By The Law, the people of Israel had to fast once a year (Day of Atonement). **This bloke fasted twice a week.**

By The Law, he had to tithe a tenth of everything he produced. But he not only did that – he tithed on everything he consumed/**bought**ⁱ.

So, basically his prayer was “Thank You God, that I’m so wonderful, and not like other people...”

¹³ **But the tax collector, standing far off**

With the design of the Temple, the most holy place (the Holy of Holies), was in the inner room, cut off by a thick curtain (which was split from top to bottom, BTW, when Jesus died on the cross)... But before God tore that curtain in two, that curtain was a symbol of the unapproachability of God. God is holy. People were not.

And only once a year (on the Day of Atonement), only one person (the High Priest) was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies.

- Outside of that, was the Holy Place. Certain priests were allowed to enter “The Holy Place” at particular times, to perform particular services.
- Outside of that, was the Court of the Priests, and that’s how close the priests were usually allowed to get;
- Outside of that, was the Court of Israel. And that’s how close the Men of Israel were allowed to get;
- Outside of that, was the Court of Women. And that’s how close the Women of Israel were allowed to get.
- And outside of the temple itself, was the Court of the Gentiles (non-Jews).

There were Gentiles, who believed in God, but they hadn’t gone through the full initiation ceremonies required to become a Jew. (They were known as the “God-Fearers”). And they were allowed into the Court of the Gentiles.

Can you see the picture here? Because of the Holiness of God, some were allowed near. Others were not. Of course, that all changed, when Jesus died on the cross, and God tore that curtain in two. Now, for a Christian, not only are we allowed to enter into the presence of God, (male/female; Jew/gentile; priest/layperson)... Not only are we allowed to enter into the presence of God, but God, by His Holy Spirit, lives in us, and we can’t get any closer than that.

But that's why the tax collector stood far off. He didn't feel worthy to come near. Maybe he just poked his nose through the gate, into the edge of the court of Israel. Or, maybe he held back, and didn't venture beyond the court of the women... He felt so unworthy (before God), he stayed at the back.

It sounds a bit like when people come to church at Bush Disciples... Why do we do that? *You know, I've checked, and there aren't cushions on the back seats. The front seats are just as comfortable.*

Is it because we feel "unworthy", that we tend to sit at the back? Is it because we feel we don't fully belong??? The back row seems to be the most popular seats in the house.

Please; Please. Know that you are welcome. And know that in Christ, you are worthy. You don't need to be like the Tax Collector and sit down the back...

- Jesus loves you at the front; and
- Jesus loves you at the back; and
- He loves you at the middle...

You are welcome, wherever you find yourself sitting in church.

So, we're getting a picture that the Tax Collector feels totally unworthy.

13 ... the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

And Jesus said:

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

So, there's 2 applications to this. First, we'll talk about "salvation" (becoming a Christian)...

Last week, the message was about "vindication" – about how, on the Day of the Lord (when Jesus returns), He will judge justly, and the righteous will be vindicated... But we're learning here, that the Pharisee wasn't vindicated. Why? Because he trusted in his own righteousness...

There are many people who feel "I'm not good enough to go to church/be a Christian". You know what? They are closer than they think...

But, others are more like the Pharisee:

- "I'm pretty good";
- "I haven't killed anyone";
- "I've got everything in order";
- "I'm basically a good person";

Therefore, when I die, God's going to be pleased to have me."

Those who feel like that, are a long way from God. They are filled with their own self-confidence and self-righteousness. They are completely blind to the fact that they are a sinner, in need of a Saviour.

But those who are like the tax collector – those:

- who feel totally unworthy;
- who are very aware of their sin and wrong-doing;
- who know full-well, that they are a sinner, destined for hell...

These are the ones who cry out to God, “Have mercy”.

Let’s talk about “Mercy”. The Greek phrase describing the Tax-Collectors prayer, is asking for a special type of mercy – Atoning mercy.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, a sacrifice was made, for the forgiveness of sins. Now, we know, that Jesus has taken over from that. When our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross, He became the perfect sacrifice. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, became the atoning sacrifice, by which our sins are forgiven.

You see, the Tax-Collector, he knew that God cannot just overlook our sins – He cannot just pretend that they didn’t happen. If He did, then God would not be just. Justice **demand**s that our sins be punished. And the Atoning Mercy of God, is that Jesus took the punishment that I deserved, and He took the punishment that you deserved.

Isn’t that humbling.... And when we are aware of the true cost of Atonement (the suffering and death of Jesus), we’re not going to take that lightly, are we....

And so, the Tax-Collector was justified. That means, he was “declared to be acquitted” by God... But the Pharisee was not. Why was the Pharisee not forgiven of his sins? Because he didn’t confess them. He was confident in his own righteousness, and he didn’t cry out to God for mercy.

And so, the Tax-Collector (somebody who probably carried a lot of sin), confessed that sin, and humbly asked for atoning mercy. And God forgave Him – “You are no longer guilty”.

And for you and I to be saved, there is no place for:

- self-justification;
- self-righteousness;
- comparing, “well compared to others, I’m not a bad person”.

To be saved, requires a broken and contrite heart, that cries out, **'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'**

And you will be saved.

So, what then? In Christ, we know that our sins are forgiven. But I think we’ve got more to learn from this parable,,, and that is, the attitude we take in prayer.

Jesus said: **For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.**

Even as Christians, when it comes to “self”, it is possible for us to see ourselves through a somewhat distorted lens. And this works both ways.

For some Christians, they never, ever understand, or accept just how holy we are. ¹ John 1:9 (ESV) ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Do you believe that?

The blood of Jesus, is the most powerful cleaning agent in the universe. It can remove sin (It's the only thing that can).

So, up until a point, “guilt” is good. Why do I say that “guilt is good”? Because The Holy Spirit uses the feeling of “guilt”, to prompt us to repent of sin, and to seek forgiveness of sin...

And at that point, sin is gone. And so, if feelings of guilt continue, where do those feelings come from? It's not from the Holy Spirit. It's the Evil one (the Accuser), saying “Are you really forgiven?”.

And so, when you confess your sin, and then 2 weeks later, you're feeling guilty about it, and you say, “God, remember that sin I confessed to you”, and He'll go “Nup.”...

When we confess our sin, we are totally forgiven. And if I continue see myself as being “unholy”, I have a distorted view. It's a view that does not come from faith.

But it also works the other way. There's times when we fail to recognise sin we need to repent of. And so we approach God in prayer, just like the Pharisee did...

Things might not be going so well, and so we cry out to God – we take it to the Lord in prayer,,,, And in our prayer (let's be honest) there is a natural inclination to view ourselves as “the righteous”, and the other person as “the sinner” – They're the ones in the wrong, so God, fix them...

I've been there. Have you? Where all I see is the hurt that I feel, and other person is to blame, and I fail to recognise my own sin... **'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'**

So, if I was to sum this parable up, I think I'd say, “For a Christian, prayer requires a bold humility.” We know that in Christ, we are welcome to approach the Throne of God in prayer. That takes a boldness – to come before the Almighty God. It's not presumptuous, because He is our Heavenly Father, who welcomes us with open arms.

But it also takes humility. **everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."**

Immediately after this parable, there's an incident recorded, that actually helps to understand it even better.

Parents were bringing their children to Jesus (“infants” is the word – tiny children). They were bringing their children, for Jesus to lay His hands on them and bless them. And the

Disciples shoed them away. We don't know why. Maybe they thought Jesus had enough on His plate. Maybe they thought Jesus shouldn't be bothered with these little kids...

And Jesus said:

Let the children come to me, [Don't block] them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

A little infant, is unable to provide for themselves. They are totally dependent on their Mum and Dad. And an infant has the utmost faith in their parents, knowing that they will provide for them, what they need...

Such is the Kingdom of God.

Self-righteousness? No such thing. The only righteousness that will save us, is the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Self-sufficiency? No such thing. We depend on God completely.

Some people pooh-pooh Christianity because "Oh, you're childish. You expect a grown-up to believe that...."

But let me tell you, what we believe isn't childish. It's the Eternal Wisdom of Almighty God. It's the exact opposite of

childish... But when we encounter the Eternal Wisdom of Almighty God, we realise just how far we fall short of Him.

And so, like a child with a loving parent,

- we humble ourselves;
- We trust Him;
- We honour Him; and
- We depend on Him.

And just as Jesus received children and blessed the children,,
Let us never hinder children from coming to Jesus...

It gives me great joy to see the way we welcome children into this church.

- parents bringing their children to be blessed; and
- children's stories: aren't they wonderful; and
- the way that so many people volunteer to serve the children in Bush Kids Sunday School.

Children are so important to Jesus, and they are so important to us.

Such is the Kingdom of God.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,
Have mercy on me: a sinner.

Lord,
I recognise that my own righteousness counts as
nothing,
because my sin is so great.

Nothing I could ever do, could ever make up for it.

Lord, help me to always be humble.
Give me a true perspective,
That helps me to recognise my own sin,
And to not put myself in the place of "the righteous"
And the other person in the place of "the sinner".

As we pray,
Give us a humility that does not elevate ourselves,
And tear others down.
And forgive us, for when we've done that in the past.

And Lord,
we pray for Your blessing upon the Children.

They are a reminder of the way that we totally depend
on You;
And we know You love them, as You love us.
Thank You for the gift of these children,
And we pray that they would grow into
Humble men and women of faith,
Who continue to depend on You for all things .

In Jesus' Name,
Amen.

ⁱ “Even though a grower had already given the tithe for certain produce required by the Law, some Pharisees tithed food that they ate.” Bock DL. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament – Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1996.