



The Investigator's Gospel

Session 17 – Chapter 18 – True Humility

Luke 18:9-14

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

13 'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

14 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

This parable illustrates the need for a humble and contrite heart before God. In the parable forgiveness comes not to the proud and self-righteous Pharisee, who thinks that his good deeds have earned him a right standing before God, but to the tax collector, who recognizes his own sinfulness and prays for mercy. The parable probably shocks Jesus' listeners, who consider the Pharisees' pious and upright, but the tax collectors wicked sinners.

The Pharisees were admired by the common folk for their piety and devotion to the Mosaic Law. Our contemporary equation of Pharisaism with hypocrisy would not have been made by a first-century Jew. The word "Pharisee" is probably derived from a Hebrew term meaning "separatists" and was applied to this group because they separated themselves from those who did not follow their rigid standards of righteousness.

While the Sadducees were primarily upper-class aristocrats who dominated the Sanhedrin (the Jewish high court; as in Luke 22:66 – "At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them.") and the temple worship, the Pharisees appear to have been primarily middle-class businessmen and merchants more involved in the synagogue communities. Josephus claims that the Pharisees numbered about six thousand.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Pharisees was their strict adherence to the Torah—not only the written law of the Old Testament, but also the "oral law," a body of traditions that expanded and elaborated on the Old Testament law. Their goal was to "build a hedge" around the Torah so as to guard against any possible infringement. Their expansions of the law were also intended to apply its mandates to the changing circumstances in life. The common people had much admiration for the pious Pharisees.

Despite sharing many common beliefs, Jesus comes into frequent conflict with the Pharisees. He condemns them for raising their traditions to the level of Scripture and for focusing on the outward requirements of the law, while ignoring matters of the heart, as in Luke 11:39–43:

Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. 40 You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? 41 But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

42 “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

43 “Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

For their part, the separatist Pharisees attack Jesus’ association with tax collectors and sinners, as in 15:1–2: *“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”* They were also troubled about the way Jesus places himself above Sabbath regulations, as in Luke 6:1–5: *‘One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. 2 Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” 3 Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” 5 Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”* Most importantly perhaps, Jesus is seen as a threat to their leadership and influence over the people.

Upon the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the Scribes, Sadducees and Herodians were greatly diminished in power and influence. The Pharisees, with their greater involvement in local synagogue worship, persisted. Many scholars consider modern Rabbinic Judaism to be descended from the Pharisee movement.

“A tax collector” (18:10). The Roman government together with local authorities imposed a range of taxes on its citizens, from direct poll and land taxes to indirect tolls or customs on goods in transit. The Romans leased out the right to collect taxes to individuals, who then took a surcharge for their own expenses. Since this charge was seldom controlled, the system was open to great abuse and corruption.

Tax collectors were despised in Israel, not only because of their reputation for extortion, but also for their complicity with the hated Romans. The Mishnah prohibits even receiving alms from a tax collector at his office, since the money is presumed to have been gained illegally. If a tax collector entered a house, all that was in it became unclean. The very presence of a tax collector in the temple, the house of God, was viewed as an act of defilement.

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men (18:11).” The Pharisee’s prayer has an external air of humility since thanksgiving is given to God, but this Pharisee has a heart of pride, praying *“about himself”* (Luke 18:11) and seeking self-glorification.

“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get (18:12).” Both fasting and tithing were signs of piety in Judaism. Fasting was required only on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29–31), but pious Jews fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Jesus was questioned as to why he and his disciples did not follow this practice (Luke 5:33): *They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”*

Tithing – the giving of a tenth of one’s harvest or income to the Temple or the poor - was instructed in the Old Testament in many places, such as Leviticus 27:30: *‘A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.’* Giving alms to the poor was a sign of great piety in Judaism since it reflected God’s mercy and care for the poor. The apocryphal book of Tobit says, *“Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness... . For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life.”*

13 *‘But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* Beating one’s breast is a sign of remorse and repentance. Standing by the Western Wall, I have often seen people approach slowly, from a distance, beating their breast and praying as they come closer to the Wall for prayer. Many continue doing so while there. Others stand away from the wall, continuing their prayer of repentance, feeling unworthy to approach. In contrast, others approach the Wall at a run, displaying eagerness to approach the place of prayer. Jesus and his listeners doubtless had seen both circumstances at play.

The tax collector, unable to take comfort in his own righteousness, and aware of his unworthiness, approaches God with humility and repentance. Surprising his listeners, Jesus states, *‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

Why are the listeners surprised? Because both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector are quoting well-known Psalms. The Pharisee resembles the prayer of Psalm 26, a Psalm of David:

1 Vindicate me, Lord, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered. 2 Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; 3 for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness. 4 I do not sit with the deceitful, nor do I associate with hypocrites. 5 I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked. 6 I wash my hands in innocence... 11 I lead a blameless life; deliver me and be merciful to me.

The Tax Collector reflects the spirit of Psalm 51, which David wrote following the sins he committed through his adulterous pursuit of Bathsheba:

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified

when you judge... 9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Both approaches seem to be endorsed by Scripture; why is only the second one commended by Jesus? It all has to do with Attitude. The Pharisee approaches God boldly and begins what looks like a praise psalm: “I thank you, God.” In this type of psalm, the petitioner usually thanks God for something God has done or some blessing he has provided. But this Pharisee is grateful for himself, that he is not like other sinners, such as robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even a tax collector. He honors God by fasting voluntarily twice a week. Since it is above and beyond the call of duty, the Pharisee wears it as a badge of achievement that should cause God to give him favor.

But this prayer is actually a distortion of the praise psalm, because when the Pharisee is done, his prayer in effect is, “I thank you, God, that I am so great!” In fact, one gets the impression that God should be honored that this “faithful” Pharisee is on his team. Five times in two verses he uses the first person singular pronoun, making himself the major subject of the prayer. He even puts down the tax collector praying beside him, referring to him derisively as “this tax collector.”

In contrast, the tax collector does not stand up but approaches God with a sense of distance. He does not look up to heaven, a sign of contrition, but beats his breast, fully aware that he approaches God as a sinner. His prayer is different: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” There is no self-congratulation. There is no summary of his good deeds. There is no sense that God ought to feel honored or obligated to the petitioner. There is but one recognition: his need for God’s mercy. He comes to God desiring only to improve his relationship to God.

Jesus’ comment closes the passage. He endorses the tax collector’s humility. The one justified before God, the one whose prayer is heard, is not that of the religious man with all of his works. The prayer God hears is the call for mercy. Jesus explains why. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while the humbled will be lifted up. This principle is highlighted throughout this Gospel:

*Luke 1:52 – He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
Luke 14:11 - For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Pride preaches merit; humility pleads for compassion. Pride negotiates as an equal; humility approaches in need. Pride separates by putting down others; humility identifies with others, recognizing we all have the same need. Pride destroys through its alienating self-service; humility opens doors with its power to sympathize with the struggle we share. Pride turns up its nose; humility offers an open and lifted-up hand.

(with notes from Zondervan’s “Bible Background Commentary” and “NIV Commentary”)

Jesus and the Children - Luke 18:15-17

15 People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'

The reference to the humble who will be exalted (18:14) transitions naturally into a passage about people bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus. When the disciples try to turn them away, Jesus says not to hinder them because the kingdom of God belongs to “such as these.” The point is that receiving the kingdom of God takes childlike faith and dependence on God.

“*to place his hands on them*” (18:15). In that culture, as in many today, the parents were seeking a blessing from this prominent rabbi, who himself was obviously blessed by God.

“*They rebuked them*” (18:15). Children had essentially no social status in the ancient world, so the disciples consider this an intrusion on Jesus’ valuable time. Though children were certainly loved and cared for by their parents, they had essentially no social status. Jesus takes the opposite attitude. He invites the children to come to him, because they are important people. They picture what the kingdom is all about. One must trust God with the simple faith and humility of a dependent child. The kingdom is made up of people who display such qualities.

Jesus repeats this point throughout the New Testament. Matthew and Mark both repeat the admonition to welcome the children, and that the Kingdom belongs “to ones such as these.” We also hear: *Luke 10:21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.*

“A childlike faith of humility, trust and acceptance is that which most clearly recognises our dependence upon our heavenly Father.”

Jesus Loved Children (from Christianity “Timeline 1-300”)

The familiar New Testament picture of Jesus taking a child in his arms and receiving him with love portrays an attitude of care and concern for children found nowhere else in the ancient world. Children, along with women, old men, and slaves, were viewed as physically weak burdens on society who had little value to the wider life of the community. In Greece and Rome, it was an accepted practice to abandon unwanted children along the roadsides to die.

Jesus, however, seemed to always find time for youngsters; he told his disciples that unless they became like little children they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. He warned his followers not to despise children or to cause them to stumble. Children were valuable and were to be treated with love and care.

Jesus' teachings concerning children were faithfully followed by the early church, which believed that to receive a child in the name of Christ was to receive Christ Himself.

Admonitions against the pagan practices of abortion and child abandonment were found in the earliest Christian writings. The Epistle of Barnabas (written between AD 70 and 132) commanded: *“Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born. Thou shalt not withdraw thy hand from thy son, or from thy daughter, but from their infancy thou shalt teach them the fear of the Lord.”*

Christians began collecting infants abandoned by their parents and raised them as their own. If pagans took in such abandoned children, it was most often for immoral purposes. The second century Christian Justin Martyr (100-165) spoke out against the practice of abandoning children: *“As for us, we have been taught that to expose newly born children is the action of wicked men... We refuse to do this, first, because we see that almost all so exposed - boys as well as girls - are brought up for prostitution. As the ancients are said to have reared herds of oxen, or goats, or sheep, or grazing horses, so now we see that you rear children for this shameful purpose.”*

Why was the early Christian attitude toward children so unusual? Simply because it recognized the child as a person. Both children and adults were equal in the kingdom of God. The Christians taught that God cared for children, as well as slaves, women and barbarians, just as much as He did for men. Entrance into the Kingdom of God did not depend on wealth, status, learning, or personal merit. Therefore, salvation was open to children as much as to adults.

Although children were accepted as part of the early church, there were no Christian educational programs for children. There were classes for catechumens or those wishing to join the church, but no specific classes or schools for children. There was the conviction that such training was primarily the responsibility of the parents. Several church leaders addressed letters or sermons to parents instructing them in the proper Christian training of their children.

In the fourth century John Chrysostom (349-407) wrote *“The Right Way for Parents to Bring up Their Children”* stating that children were *“untamed wild creatures who needed many restraints to bridle their unruly natures.”* Parents, he said, *“should be more concerned about training a child's soul in virtue than educating him in literature or the arts.”* Chrysostom told parents that *“if good precepts are impressed on the soul while it is yet tender, no man will be able to destroy them when they have set firm.”*

St. Jerome (347-420) in his letters of advice to friends on the bringing up of their children also emphasized the importance of the early training of children. He believed that a child's early impressions were not easily erased. *“You cannot take the dye from wool that has been dyed,”* he said.

But perhaps the early church leader whose writings most revealed the importance of childhood was St. Augustine (354-430). His “Confessions” was an autobiographical account of his early life and conversion at the age of thirty-three. It has been heralded as the first book to take childhood seriously. Augustine unabashedly told of his boyhood pranks, his distaste for his studies, his love for play, and his fits of temper. Yet, through all of his childhood mischief and a licentious youth, Augustine traced God's hand continuously at work drawing him to Himself. God's grace was as much concerned with a little child as with a mature adult.

Augustine would have heartily agreed with the familiar Sunday School song “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” for he had experienced God's love and care in his childhood.