

Life Group #2: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Objectives: We want students to know and understand that there is only one way to obtain righteousness from God. All of our confidence should be in Christ and not in ourselves. We want both Christians and non-Christians to receive grace from God and allow Him to declare us righteous instead of ourselves or each other doing it.

Setting the Scene:

This is a great story about how we can view God, ourselves, and each other. It is about a pharisee and a tax collector. Pharisees were known as the keepers of the law of the old testament. The law enabled Jewish people to have a right standing before God. Pharisees easily saw themselves as the most righteous of all the Jews. Tax collectors were Jewish people who collected taxes for the Roman government. They were known for dishonest practices, having turned on the Jews for riches from working for Rome.

This is quite the contrast of people for Jesus to talk about. He talks about each person and their 'right standing before God' (or their relationship with God). One important note before we read the passage – make sure you notice that Jesus is talking to Pharisees (not the tax collectors). It's very important to know the audience to consider why Jesus is choosing this parable to discuss.

Explore:

- **Read Luke 18:9-14**
- **Describe the story in your own words.**

In this parable the tax collector goes home justified while the Pharisee does not. Justification means the tax collector is able to stand rightly in the presence of God and the Pharisee will be condemned. We need to compare and contrast the difference in the prayers to see what sets them apart.

The Pharisee

- **What is the Pharisee's attitude towards himself and others?** (Confident in himself, thinks he's better than others. He has a lot of good things in his life, but he's not following the command to love God and others.)
- **What is his attitude towards God?** (There's a lot of 'I' statements with just a brief mention of God. As if to say, 'God thanks for making me awesome'. He goes above and beyond the law to show how perfect he is. He can look around at others and think 'How could God not want me? Especially when I look around at your other options')

The Tax Collector

- **What is his attitude towards God? Why is he so scared of God?** (Contrary to the Pharisee, this guy has done nothing right. He doesn't even try to say, 'Well, at least I have this going for me'. He knows he doesn't deserve any favor from God.)
- **What causes the tax collector to ask for God's mercy? How does God respond to him and why?** (Knowing he has no worthiness to offer, he is completely dependent on asking for God's mercy. God responds with His grace, giving him right standing when he should have none.)

Bringing understanding:

What the Pharisee and the tax collector have in common is that they both need to be justified by God. They both have the problem of sin in their life. Their difference is only one recognizes it.

- **How have all of the qualities of the Pharisee actually created distance between him and God (and God's grace)?** (He's learned to depend on his abilities to please God instead of embracing God's grace for his sinfulness)
- **Can you relate with the Pharisee? What are examples of ways you might feel more deserving of a relationship with God than some others?** (It can be many things – intelligence, hard work, not breaking the law, good works, going to church, being at Bible study tonight. Intellectually many may know that we are saved by grace, but on a heart level it is easy to find more trust in our works and how we see ourselves)
- **Ask these questions to the group and let them think to themselves if they relate:**
 1. When you read the Bible, are you ever quicker to think about other's sin rather than the sin in your own life?
 2. When thinking about others, are you quicker to compare achievements and blessings or to relate in each other's brokenness and need for grace?

3. Are you more bothered by the sin in non-Christian lives than you are saddened that they are living a life apart from Jesus?
4. Have you thought to yourself, 'thank you Lord that I am not like the Pharisee and have a heart like the tax collector'?

If the tax collector had gone to the Pharisee for advice, surely he would have gotten a long list of areas 'needing to be fixed' in order to become more pleasing to God. But God shows that He responds to the tax collector turning towards dependence on God rather than depending on himself.

We can often think God is more concerned about our outward appearance (that is, what's most quickly noticed by others) rather than the condition of our heart. This can lead to the desire to earn God's approval rather than having a personal relationship with him (just like we desire to earn the approval of people). Here's an example of what that can look like in a modern day story.

- **Watch the short film 'Not Evelyn Cho'.** (Found at globalshortfilmnetwork.com.) **Ask everyone before the film the film to think about -> 1) What is Sarah longing for? 2) What changes in her life and what doesn't?**

After the film, discuss these questions

(Tip – There's often different opinions about the film. That's great! Some will think Sarah really grew for the better, and it doesn't matter about the guy. Some will think her closing the curtain at the end signifies her reverting back to where she started. Have fun discussing! What's in the boxes she never opened? Why did the dude not carry the huge box in for her!

The goal is to discuss that motivators can impact us in many ways, but there can still be a lot of loneliness in works if there is no opportunity for heart change.)

- **What do you think Sarah is longing for?**
- **How does Sarah grow during the film?**
- **What remains unchanged at the ending?**
- **Why did Sarah fail at getting to know the delivery guy?** (Her strategy was to make herself more attractive rather than get to know him.)
- **In what ways do we try to get approval from God, or more simply put, try to get God to notice us? What is the good that comes? What is the bad?**

Apply

A relationship with God should spur you on towards growing in Biblical living, not the other way around. While this growth should produce confidence in our relationship with Christ, this confidence should always be based in humility because of what Christ has done for us instead of confidence in what we can do for Christ.

- **What are examples of how confidence in yourself keep you from your need for Jesus?**
- **What are areas in your life that you want to fix for God's approval rather than confess your need for God's grace?**
- **When the tax collector came to God he was scared. What are truths about God that you need to be reminded of to build your trust in Jesus?**