

JOEL 2:23-32 and LUKE 18:9-14

LONG AGO IN A SMALL VILLAGE A WEALTHY BAKER BROUGHT TOGETHER 20 OF THE TOWN'S POOREST CHILDREN EACH DAY, AND GAVE THEM A LOAF OF BREAD FOR THEIR FAMILIES.

SADLY THE CHILDREN HABITUALLY FOUGHT AMONGST EACH OTHER TO GET THE LARGEST LOAVES.

ALL OF THEM PARTICIPATED IN THIS DAILY SCRAMBLE EXCEPT FOR ONE LITTLE GIRL, WHO ALWAYS WAITED AND TOOK THE LAST AND THUS SMALLEST LOAF, THANKED THE BAKER AND WENT HOME.

THEN ONE-DAY THE CHILD'S MOTHER WAS SHOCKED TO FIND SEVERAL SILVER COINS INSIDE THE SMALL LOAF OF BREAD.

SHE SENT THE MONEY BACK WITH HER DAUGHTER THE NEXT DAY, ASSUMING THERE HAD BEEN SOME KIND OF MISTAKE.

BUT THE BAKER TOLD THE CHILD HE INTENDED FOR HER FAMILY TO GET THOSE COINS AS A REWARD FOR HER ATTITUDE OF PATIENCE AND GRATITUDE.

THUS WE LEARN HOW IMPORTANT ATTITUDE CAN BE IN OUR LIVES. JESUS, IT SEEMS, WAS ALSO CONCERNED WITH ATTITUDE, PARTICULARLY WHEN IT COMES TO PRAYER.

THE FIRST PORTION OF CHAPTER 18 INVOLVES A TEACHING ON BEING PERSISTENT IN PRAYER, AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE STORY OF THE WIDOW WHO DID NOT LEAVE A JUDGE ALONE UNTIL SHE GOT JUSTICE.

TODAY'S STORY INVOLVES A LESSON ON PRAYER AS WELL. THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND TAX COLLECTOR OFFERS INSTRUCTION ON THE TONE AND ATTITUDE OF PRAYER.

IT WAS IN ITS TIME, A RATHER SHOCKING PARABLE. SHOCKING BECAUSE THE MORAL OF THIS STORY, AS JESUS TOLD IT, WAS NOT WHAT PEOPLE EXPECTED.

MOST PEOPLE LISTENING TO THE LORD TELL THIS STORY WOULD HAVE LABELED THE PHARISEE AS A GOOD GUY.

THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN SURE HIS PRAYERS WERE BEST. THIS PARTICULAR PHARISEE IN FACT APPEARED TO BE A GOOD MAN WHO LIVED AN EXEMPLARY LIFE.

HE NOT ONLY OBEYED THE REQUIREMENT OF THE LAW, HE STROVE TO DO MORE THAN WHAT WAS ASKED.

FOR EXAMPLE: GOD'S LAW ONLY **REQUIRED** PEOPLE TO FAST ONE DAY A YEAR. THIS PHARISEE FASTED TWICE A WEEK OUT OF DEVOTION TO GOD.

LIKewise THE LAW MANDATED PEOPLE TITHE TO GOD ONE-TENTH OF ALL PRODUCE AND LIVESTOCK THEY RECEIVED.

THIS MAN TITHED THAT, PLUS ONE-TENTH OF ALL HIS OTHER INCOME AS WELL.

IN SHORT HE WAS A VERY DEVOUT MAN IN ALL OF HIS RELIGIOUS PRACTICES, THEREFORE HE WAS THE KIND OF PERSON OTHERS NATURALLY ADMIRERD.

IN COMPARISON TO THE PHARISEE THERE WAS THE HATED TAX COLLECTOR.

THIS MAN WORKED WITH ROME AND THUS, BY HIS VERY LIVELIHOOD WAS CONSIDERED, BY HIS FELLOW JEWS TO BE A TRAITOR TO THEM, AND TO GOD.

ADDITIONALLY, MOST TAX COLLECTORS MADE THEIR MONEY BY CHARGING MORE THAN THE REQUIRED FEES AND POKETING THE DIFFERENCE.

NATURALLY NO DECENT JEW WANTED TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THAT KIND OF MAN.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, WHEN JESUS PROCLAIMED GOD ACCEPTED THE PRAYER OF THE TAX COLLECTOR, BUT REJECTED THE ONE FROM THE PHARISEE- PEOPLE WERE SHOCKED.

OF COURSE, THOSE OF US WHO HAVE HEARD THIS STORY BEFORE AND REMEMBERED THE ENDING WERE NOT AT ALL SURPRISED.

WE IN FACT PROBABLY IDENTIFIED WITH THE TAX COLLECTOR KNOWING HIS PRAYER WAS BEST.

BUT IF ANY OF US DID THAT- GUESS WHAT- WE HAVE BECOME ENTRAPPED BY THIS PARABLE, JUST LIKE JESUS' FIRST AUDIENCE WAS. HOW CAN THAT BE?

WHENEVER PEOPLE SEEK TO BE **JUSTIFIED** BY COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THEMSELVES WITH OTHERS, THEY COMMIT THE SAME KIND OF SIN THE PHARISEE WAS GUILTY OF.

INDEED TO EVEN THANK GOD IN OUR HEARTS THAT WE DO NOT PRAY LIKE THE PHARISEE IN THIS STORY IS TO ACT SELF-RIGHTEOUSLY AND THUS TO SIN BEFORE GOD.

SO THEN HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET THIS PARABLE FOR OUR OWN LIVES?

FIRST WE NEED TO BE AWARE THAT JESUS UPHOLDS NEITHER MAN AS A ROLE MODEL FOR HIS FOLLOWERS.

AND YET THIS STORY SUGGESTS WE CAN LEARN FROM BOTH OF THEM. HOW CAN WE?

THE FIRST LESSON TEACHES US IS THAT THEY BOTH WERE BEING HONEST IN THEIR PRAYERS.

THEY WERE HONEST IN THE SENSE THAT EACH MAN BELIEVED ABSOLUTELY THE TRUTH OF THE WORDS HE SPOKE TO GOD.

SECONDLY, WE NEED TO OBSERVE THAT JESUS NEITHER CONDEMNS THE PHARISEE'S CHARITY AND RELIGIOUS RITUAL, NOR DOES HE APPROVE OF THE TAX COLLECTOR'S LIFE STYLE.

IN OTHER WORDS- THE PHARISEE IS NOT A VILLAIN AND THE TAX COLLECTOR IS NOT A HERO.

WHAT THEN IS THE DIFFERENCE IN THEIR PRAYERS THAT GAINED ONE'S APPROVAL AND THE OTHER'S REJECTION BY GOD? **ATTITUDE!**

THE TAX COLLECTOR WAS JUSTIFIED BECAUSE OF HIS DEPENDENCE UPON GOD, AS REVEALED BY SINCERE AND PRAYERFUL REPENTANCE.

HE KNEW HE HAD DONE WRONG AND OFFERED NO EXCUSES. FEARING GOD HAD NOTICED HIS SIN, HE THREW HIMSELF UPON GOD'S MERCY AND LOVE, SEEKING FORGIVENESS.

THE PHARISEE ON THE OTHER HAND, SEEMED TO FEAR THAT GOD MIGHT **NOT** HAVE NOTICED ALL THE GOOD HE HAD DONE.

HE THEREFORE THANKED GOD FOR THE FACT HE WAS SUCH A GOOD PHARISEE.

BUT IN HIS EFFORTS TO RECEIVE GOD'S FAVOR THE PHARISEE DEMONSTRATED NO SIGN OF FEELING EVEN A LITTLE DEPENDENT UPON GOD.

HE DIDN'T ASK FOR FORGIVENESS BECAUSE HE PROBABLY BELIEVED HE DID NOT NEED IT; SINCE HE WAS SO ZEALOUS TO OUT DO OTHERS IN FOLLOWING GOD'S LAW.

AND THERE INDEED WAS THE PHARISEE'S BIG MISTAKE AND THE REASON GOD REJECTED HIS PRAYER.

YOU SEE, HE BELIEVED HIS OWN ACTIONS AND LIFE JUSTIFIED HIM.

HE PRAYED ONLY TO REMIND GOD OF ALL HIS OWN GOOD DEEDS, AND TO THANK GOD THAT HE WAS SUCH A GOOD PERSON.

BUT, YOU WILL NOTICE HE NEVER ACTUALLY RELIED ON, OR EVEN ASKED FOR THE LORD'S HELP.

THE PHARISEE BY HIS ATTITUDE LEFT LITTLE OR NO ROOM FOR GOD TO ENTER INTO HIS LIFE AND CHANGE HIM.

AFTER ALL, IF WE BELIEVE WE LIVE PERFECT LIVES- WE DON'T NEED TO CHANGE, AND WE IN FACT DON'T EVEN REALLY NEED GOD.

THUS AN ATTITUDE THAT LACKS HUMILITY BEFORE THE LORD, AND DOES NOT ACKNOWLEDGE A PERSONAL NEED FOR GOD'S MERCY AND LOVE- IS A STUMBLING BLOCK TO SALVATION.

REMEMBER THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET JOEL: "EVERYONE WHO CALLS UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

AND AS THE PARABLE JESUS TOLD ILLUSTRATES- IT WAS NOT THE PHARISEE, BUT THE TAX COLLECTOR WHO CALLED UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD, THAT DAY IN THE TEMPLE.

THUS, THE PHARISEE BY HIS PRAYER, REPRESENTED THE PEOPLE OF GOD WHEN THEY BEGAN TO TURN FROM RELIANCE UPON THE LORD, AND TRUSTED MORE IN THEIR OWN STRENGTH AND RESOURCES.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SUCH AN ATTITUDE TIME AND TIME AGAIN, WAS THAT GOD PUNISHED THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL FOR SUCH SIN.

SOMETIMES PUNISHMENT CAME FROM A HUMAN ENEMY, OTHER TIMES, LIKE IN THE BOOK OF JOEL, THE ENEMY WAS LOCUSTS OR ANOTHER NON-HUMAN FORCE.

BUT ALWAYS THE PEOPLE WERE WARNED BY GOD BEFORE THE PUNISHMENT CAME, AND ALSO WERE ENCOURAGED IN THE MIDST OF IT TO REPENT AND TURN BACK TO GOD.

THE PROMISE FOUND IN JOEL SPECIFICALLY TOLD THE PEOPLE THE LORD COULD AND WOULD RESCUE THEM IF THEY WOULD RETURN TO THEIR GOD.

THE PEOPLE WERE CALLED TO RECOGNIZE THEY NEEDED THE LORD'S GUIDANCE AND LOVE.

AND CALLED TO ACKNOWLEDGE DEPENDENCE UPON GOD, RATHER THAN ON THEIR OWN RESOURCES ALONE.

JOEL PROMISES THAT SINCERE REPENTANCE WILL BRING NEW LIFE.

IT WILL EVEN, IN THE FUTURE, BRING THE GREAT AND WONDERFUL GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON ALL THE PEOPLE OF GOD, REGARDLESS OF GENDER, AGE, OR SOCIAL STATUS.

WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO THE MEANING OF JESUS' PARABLE ABOUT THE PHARISEE AND TAX COLLECTOR WHO EACH WENT TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY.

WHEN PEOPLE REPLY PRIMARILY UPON THEMSELVES, THEY WILL COME UP EMPTY, SINCE THEY ARE NOT REALLY OPEN TO GOD'S RESPONSE TO THEIR PRAYERS.

HOWEVER, WHEN PEOPLE RELY ON GOD TO HELP THEM LIVE RIGHTLY AND FORGIVE THEM WHEN THEY FAIL, THEY WILL BE FILLED AS A RESULT OF THEIR PRAYERS.

FILLED THAT IS, WITH THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE AND FORGIVENESS.

THAT- WAS IN FACT THE EXPERIENCE OF THE TAX COLLECTOR WHO MADE HIMSELF VULNERABLE BEFORE THE LORD, AND THUS WAS ABLE TO ASK FOR AND RECEIVE MERCY.

HE ALSO WAS JUSTIFIED BECAUSE HE TRUSTED IN GOD'S WILL AND ACTION RATHER THAN HIS OWN RESOURCES TO SAVE HIM.

THE PHARISEE SADLY DID THE OPPOSITE. HE TRUSTED IN ALL HIS GOOD WORKS BELIEVING HIS JUSTIFICATION BEFORE GOD WAS DUE TO HIS OWN MERIT AND DEVOTION.

CONSEQUENTLY OF THE TWO MEN IN THE STORY, THE ONE MORE LIKELY TO RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS THE TAX COLLECTOR.

CONVERSELY, BECAUSE THE PHARISEE DID NOT OPEN HIMSELF UP TO GOD, HE RECEIVED NOTHING, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS, ACCORDING TO GOD'S LAW A MORE RIGHTEOUS PERSON.

IN THIS STORY- WE FIND A LESSON FOR ALL CHRISTIANS. IN FACT, THESE WORDS JESUS SPOKE ARE NOT REALLY ABOUT A PHARISEE AND A TAX COLLECTOR, BUT ABOUT EACH OF US.

HERE WE ARE BEING ASKED ABOUT OUR WILLINGNESS TO BE OPEN WITH AND VULNERABLE TO GOD.

WE ARE ALSO ASKED TO RELY ON CHRIST AND NOT ON OUR OWN GOODNESS TO SAVE US.

WE TOLD THAT WHEN WE DO SO WE ARE NOT ONLY JUSTIFIED BY CHRIST, BUT ALSO SANCTIFIED, THAT IS MADE HOLY THROUGH HIM, AS WE SUBMIT OURSELVES TO HIS KEEPING.

IN THIS WAY WE ARE NOT ONLY FREED FROM SIN, BUT ALSO EMANCIPATED FROM THE NEED TO COMPARE OURSELVES WITH OTHERS, IN ORDER TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES OR TO WIN GOD'S APPROVAL.

WHEN WE TRULY ACCEPT GOD'S LOVE AS REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST IT NO LONGER MATTERS HOW OUR LIVES COMPARE WITH OTHERS.

WHEN WE TRUST IN GOD'S LOVE, WE DON'T NEED TO SEEK SELF-JUSTIFICATION LIKE THE PHARISEE.

NOR DO WE NEED TO DESPAIR LIKE THE TAX COLLECTOR. WE CAN HOWEVER EMULATE THEIR VIRTUES.

THEREFORE, WE ARE TO SEEK TO FOLLOW THE FIRST ONE'S EXAMPLE OF STRIVING TO OBEY GOD'S LAW WITH OUR WHOLE BEING.

AND ALSO TO FOLLOW THE SECOND MAN'S EXAMPLE OF SINCERELY CONFESSING OUR SIN BEFORE GOD AND RELYING ON HIS MERCY.

INDEED, WE NEED ONLY CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD, AND BY THE GRACE OF GOD THROUGH CHRIST, WE ARE FORGIVEN, AND SAVED. WE ARE ALSO GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRY AGAIN.

SUCH IS ONE WAY THIS PARABLE CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AND APPLIED TO THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN 2019.

BUT THERE IS ALSO A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE TODAY'S STORY OFFERS.

THIS PERSPECTIVE THAT SAYS WE ARE ALREADY A LITTLE LIKE BOTH THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR.

TRULY, SOMETIMES WE APPROACH GOD IN ARROGANT SELF-RELIANCE, OR WITH THE ASSURANCE OF OUR OWN GOODNESS AND THUS DO NOT LET GOD TOUCH US.

BUT THEN OTHER TIMES WE COME OPENLY INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD CALLING UPON HIS NAME TO HEAL US, FORGIVE US, AND TOUCH US WITH HIS GRACE.

ONE THEOLOGIAN SUGGESTS THIS IS THE TRUE MORAL OF THE PARABLE AND THE MAIN POINT JESUS WAS MAKING WHEN HE TOLD THE STORY.

HERE IS HOW THE THEOLOGIAN INTERPRETS THIS TEXT FROM LUKE 18:

"...THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE ENTER WORSHIP AS PHARISEES WHO ASK NOTHING AND GET NOTHING..."

THERE ARE ALSO TIMES IN LIFE WHEN WE ENTER AS TAX COLLECTORS, NEEDING EVERYTHING AND RETURNING HOME WITH MORE THAN WE DARED TO ASK."

THIS VIEW OF THE PARABLE CERTAINLY GIVES US ADDITIONAL FOOD FOR THOUGHT.

IT CHALLENGES US NOT TO TAKE OUR ACTS OF WORSHIP OR OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS GOD FOR GRANTED.

IN SHORT, IF WE HAVE REALLY HEARD JESUS' WORDS AS FOUND IN THIS PARABLE, THEY HAVE MADE US FEEL AT LEAST A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE.

HERE, JESUS HAS INVITED US TO WRESTLE WITH OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS OURSELVES, OTHERS, AND TOWARDS GOD.

IT IS UP TO EACH ONE OF US TO DECIDE WHAT WE WILL DO WITH THIS INVITATION.

LET US PRAY:

HEAVENLY FATHER, MAY WE COME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN BEFORE YOU. GIVE US PURE HEARTS THAT WE MAY SEE YOU, HUMBLE HEARTS THAT WE MAY HEAR YOU, HEARTS OF LOVE THAT WE MAY SERVE YOU, HEARTS OF FAITH THAT WE MAY LIVE IN YOU, REVERENT HEARTS THAT WE MAY WORSHIP YOU- HERE IN THIS SANCTUARY, AND IN THE WORLD OUT THERE. IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD WE PRAY. AMEN