

SERMON – October 28, 2007 – Luke 18:9-14 – “The Position of Need”

Jesus teaches in parables. These stories are like a mirror being held up in our face. We are to see the truth of God, the truth of ourselves, and the truth of our relationship with God and others. Today’s parable does this. Lets unpack this story more about our God and how we then position ourselves before our God and have our eyes open to the truth as we look into the mirror that Jesus holds before us.

Like most parables the story is about the interaction between two characters. These characters are the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. To understand the parable you have to understand the historical context of these two characters.

Now today when we hear the word Pharisee we suspect that this person is the bad guy and we are not follow his example. But to see the truth in the parable the Pharisee was not that at all. But in the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day a Pharisee was respected and seen as a good person, an asset to society. Pharisees were known for their strict accuracy in their interpretation of the law and their scrupulous adherence to the law. They led the church by helping people know the rules and they should follow his example and follow the law. Pharisees were the good pastors for the ordinary person. They provided the rabbis for the local synagogues and probably had the best interests of the people at heart more than others in the first century. They were to ensure that by example and teachings that if you lived a good life then you would be made right with God, and the nation would be made right with God. When this good faith abiding Pharisee prays, God ignores his prayers. What?

The tax-collector, on the other hand, was a despised person. He was a collaborator with the enemy Rome. He did their dirty work by collecting taxes from his Jewish community that funded the oppressor, Rome. But he was even more hated than that. For he had the freedom to raise taxes for individuals and then he would pocket the extra money as his profit. In other words he got rich on the backs of the suffering and oppressed, like slumlord's do. He was loathed and hated by his community. He was considered a traitor and evil person. He was not the man you wanted your daughter to date or marry. He was not the person that you wanted your children and grandchildren around for he would be a good influence on them. But when he prays he is justified before God. What is this?

This difference between these two characters is one knew they needed God to change his life around and other did not. We see clues of this in verse 11. The verse can be translated as "he prayed to himself", not that he stood by himself. If his prayers are to himself it is all centered on self, then he does not need God and therefore he does not let God in. He thinks I have made it on my own living the right life. God only smiles happily on me, and agrees with me.

The tax collector knows he has done wrong. He knows he can't make it right by himself. He knows the actions of his life have taken a toll on others and himself. He knows that he NEEDS God! So he goes to God not justifying his actions: I was from a poor family, my father and mother abused me, society has never taken care of me as they should of. No, he simply comes clean before God

recognizing his sin, his shortcoming. In other words he comes clean. He can't make it right except by coming opening and honestly before God.

The tax collector comes to prayer in the position of humble need. He knows he deserves the book thrown at him. He knows that God could and probably should judge them harshly. But he also knows that the only way he can come clean and have a new start is being honest with himself and with God his Creator, the Giver of Life, The Judge of all judges. He knows that going to God was his only hope of being whole again.

One of these men was open to God and the other was not.

“Where is the dwelling of God?”

This was a question with which the rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visiting him.

They laughed at him: “What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of his glory?”

Then he answered his own question:

“God dwells wherever a person lets God in.”

You see the despised tax collector is the one who turns toward God, completely open, and honest and let's God in. The Pharisee doesn't let God in because he is convinced he doesn't need God.

Now we might ask why doesn't God accept the Pharisee as he is and love him. The answer is that God does love him, but until the Pharisee turns to God and acknowledges that before God all his actions mean nothing God will not acknowledge him because he does not let God in.

If the Pharisee after hearing his prayer, falls on his face, lies on the ground, and says Lord forgive me for putting myself on a pedestal, seeing myself as God being able to save, myself. Forgetting that before you, Almighty God, we all fall short of your glory. Lord, Jesus forgive me, Lord Jesus have mercy on me.

Then the Pharisee, too is accepted, made right. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector come to the throne of God through different paths and experiences, but before the throne they are equal, both sinners, both in need of God's grace.

Yes, need is the primary position in approaching God in prayer and the reason to let God in. But we are of the illusion that many times we aren't in need. We have a nice house, two cars or more. We have a good education. We have a good job. We have a pretty good retirement plan. We live a pretty good law abiding life. All these things make us feel that we are blessed, but it can also lead us to feel that we have no need for God. God is there all the time and I will go to God regularly in my time of NEED. But most of the time we don't see a need in our self-sufficient society.

This is a false belief. Yes God is here, present, all the time. But we don't see ourselves as needing God. So we only do brief prayer, come to worship when it fits our schedule or maybe out of commitment to others in the church, but out of NEED for God? Sounds to much too needy.

This was another lesson I learned in Ethiopia. People did not have a lot of things. I would say they were a people in need. Without so many things they

depended on their God. They prayed and worshipped with such joy and earnestness. They crowded their churches. A low attendance Sunday for them was 1,000 worshippers who walked miles in the mud to get worship. It wasn't that they were any holier than I or most of us in the United States. It was that they realized their need for God. That was the lesson that filled me. They showed me that I can't depend on myself for preaching, for living, for being faithful. I'm in such need that I can only depend on my God.

Needy people God sees. What need do you have today that you don't seem to have control over. We all have them.

- How to handle rebellious youth?
- You may wonder., how can I help my parents understand me and what my life is like?
- Those of us with aging parents wonder how to help our parents realize they are incapable to live by themselves?
- How to go on living without the help of spouse or partner when they have left or died?
- How to deal with the chaos at work?
- How to deal with the chaos at home?
- How to handle the responsibilities of work or school when it seems overwhelming?
- How to deal with addiction?
- How to deal with a co-worker or neighbor who is nasty and difficult?

- How to deal with an unsure future when facing foreclosure on house or unemployment, or the social security check shrinking in its value?
- How to deal with an unexpected health issue?
- How to deal with the guilt of a sin long past but not forgotten?
- How to deal with anger and hurt from past hurt by another person?
- How to deal with the massive problems in our society: hunger, crime, poverty, child abuse, and domestic violence?

And I can go on and on.

We are all in need of God. I think this is the starvation of our society that no one wants to admit, because we like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient. The truth is we aren't and it is the one with faith that constantly comes before God open and honest about their need. The result is that they drink the waters that quench the thirst of the soul, and they eat of the bread that satisfies their hungry spirit. They are the one that don't judge others for their lives but will tell others of the sources of their satisfaction, God through Jesus Christ.

What is your need? In silence, with our hands open in need of God, let us come before God honestly and openly, in prayer.



