

The Pharisee & The Tax Collector

In writing this report, I thought it necessary to begin with Snodgrass' book (Stories with Intent) It is not described as a "commentary book." "It is a resource book for the parables."¹ It seems likely that the parable was told in Jerusalem, either to the disciples or to the crowds gathered in and or about the city. In digging out this material I prefer to start right off with the Nimshal. Luke is stressing to the reader that one must be in prayer often and combined with living in a way of being conscious and "being in conversation with God."² And even more to the point is that by this lifestyle of deepening a relationship with God, He knows the things you ask for and therefore they begin to come into line with what God's will is for your life. Jesus is also teaching about God's desire for justice. God's desire is for relationship and prayer yet "reflective" in looking closely at yourself and how one reacts with the neighbor. The key to insert in one's reflection and learning about God's character is grasping to be compassionate and loving. Praying in the right mindset and being humble are important. "Justification" by God is Him setting you in right standing so that we can be in relationship with Him. And Jesus is pointing to the way God will respond to prayer; to honest prayer within the framework of being

¹ Snodgrass, Kyle. "Preface to the First Edition." Preface. *Stories with Intent*, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018, p. xiii.

² Snodgrass, Kyle. "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector." *Stories With Intent*, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018, p. 476.

compassionate, loving, not judgmental. God does not want to hear your prayer that starts off with "... Thank you, Lord, that I am not like ...". God does not want to hear you comparing yourself to others that they are less than yourself.

Snodgrass contends that this parable is similar to the parable of the prodigal son and the parable of the good Samaritan. He also points out that in Jesus' parable the Pharisee has gone beyond the fasting requirements of the law. And now looking at the tax collector, he was considered a betrayer working for Rome – the oppressor. I was surprised to learn the total taxes levied on the Jewish people were quite burdensome and this was on top of the Temple tax. To make matters worse, the tax collectors were considered dishonest. They were stripped of their civil rights in court to be judges or witnesses. Needless to say, the tax collector was a lonely man.

Two interpretations are most noteworthy as per Snodgrass; one was self-righteousness or Jewish legalism on the part of the Pharisee and humility with regards to the tax collector. The second was that many believe the Pharisee's challenge is due to his contempt for others and in particular the tax collector. Another way to look at this is from being in the Pharisee's shoes and thinking that he doesn't see anything wrong with putting down other people while lifting himself above them and simultaneously praying to God thanking Him that he is not like them. This in effect, is by passing "the love command." Yet we can all easily fall prey to being judgmental. Snodgrass calls it a detour. Jesus' message was often to self-evaluate, reflect and pray for God to help you see clearer.

Keener's commentary (the IVP bible background commentary) starts off with two completely opposite descriptions of the Pharisee vs. the tax collector. The Pharisee was devoted and true to the law, whereas the tax collector was deplorable. And Keener states that they weren't allowed to hold any "honorary offices." Also, in this commentary Keener looks deeper at the mindset of

the audience, who were probably Pharisees and who would think that the praying Pharisee is not boasting to God about his moral and upright behavior.

Tithing was a big factor in the life of the Pharisee, as much as twenty percent could be spent. Also fasting for an entire day was not unusual. On the other end of the spectrum, the tax collector did not make amends with an offer of redress for his sins, yet Keener, as well as Snodgrass, see God forgiving him for he was beating his breast showing deep sorrow. He was in shame because he was not looking up to Heaven. The tax collector is now in right standing before God. Due to his respectfulness before God, he is able to have a good relationship with Jehovah -Go'el. Many of those who heard this message from Jesus at the Temple would not consider the tax collector's prayer for mercy. For what has he done to get God's forgiveness? Did he do like what the Pharisee did? Tithe, fast or put himself above others so that his standing would somehow honor God? Jesus calls this out for what it is, "boasting in self-righteousness."

Stephen L. Wright Commentary, (E-Book: Jesus the Storyteller) approaches Jesus' ministry within the framework of the historical Jesus. How would the audience respond to the message in different locations in Israel? Wright's commentary points to Jesus being persistent throughout His ministry with warnings against complacency. He compares the Pharisee with the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Wright's contention is that things are not always as they appear. The Pharisee being highly respected and pious yet sinning while praying and giving thanks to God that he is not like the tax collector.

Arthur Just Jr Commentary (E-Book: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament, Vol. 3 article: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector.) It is interesting and refreshing to have Arthur Just Jr present views from five notable men. Augustine leads off in this discussion.

He poses a question to the reader asking if you are taken aback by Jesus' closing remarks in the previous parable of the Persistent Widow. What is Augustine highlighting?

Arthur Just Jr. moves right into the commentary of Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril is critical of the Pharisee in being boastful with fasting and tithing, thus giving God good cause to be angry, especially with the Pharisee condemnation of others and putting himself above others. Being puffed up above others is hated by God so Cyril writes, in paraphrasing, get off your high horse. Why are judging? While in good health you would not mock or taunt the ill; most likely because you may see yourself stricken in the same way nor does one who is in combat and upon seeing another warrior suffer an injury exalt himself after escaping combat wounding.

Martyrius comments about the prideful Pharisee. Satan was waiting to ambush him as soon as praises to God were sent. Be careful of being subdued by being prideful for the way you deliver praise to God. They are His, so don't get intoxicated and fly off into an emotional bliss.

Again, Augustine is quick to show that the Pharisee should have sincerely been sorry for his sins and to understand God's mercy is given to those who are humble.

Arthur Just Jr is juxtaposing the writings of these men and he brings us back to Cyril of Alexandria who focuses on the tax collector. They both pray in opposing methods. "One feels shame for his conduct"³ and "the foolish pharisee stood there bold and broad, lifting up his eyes without a qualm, bearing witness of himself and boastful."⁴

³ Just Jr., Arthur. "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector." *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2003, pp. 278-80. *eBook Collection (EBSCO)*, web.ebscohost.com. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.

⁴ Just Jr., Arthur. "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector." *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2003, pp 278-80. *eBook*

Ephrem the Syrian points squarely to the tax collector and credits him with overcoming the challenge of confession as opposed to confessing one's "righteousness" meaning Almsgiving. Dr Notley states the word "righteousness in the first century means charity"⁵ or almsgiving.

Finally, Arthur Just Jr. concludes with Basil the Great who gives a stunning rebuke of the Pharisee and warns of the consequences. It is best to sum up his comments with quoting these words; the pharisee "was judged inferior to a humble man and a sinner because in his self-exaltation he did not await the judgement of God but pronounced it himself. Never place yourself above anyone, not even great sinners."⁶

In Craig Blomberg's book (*Interpreting the parables*) he describes the structure of Jesus' parables, that of triadic and dyadic with regards to the Pharisee and the Tax collector showing the characteristic nature between the two characters. In this case, two men who are seen by the people living in the first century are clearly at opposite ends of the spectrum. They would view the Pharisee as "the hero of the story instead of the tax collector"⁷ The Pharisee being of the

Collection (EBSCO), web.ebscohost.com. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.

⁵ Notley, Steven "Almsgiving: Class instruction on 23 March 2023.

⁶ Just Jr., Arthur. "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector." *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2003, pp. 278-80. *eBook Collection (EBSCO)*, web.ebscohost.com. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.

⁷ Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Second ed., Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2012. p341

elite religious group and respected while the tax collector was loathed by the people. Blomberg deposits that this parable is the best example of depicting one man who reflects those in Israel as “self-righteous” and the other as “penitent.” The two points of this story, he contends, are that if you put yourself above others, you will be knocked down. Those who are sincerely sorry for sinning and ask for His mercy will be rewarded. Interestingly, Blomberg points to Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ sermon on the plain – The Beatitudes – in describing “the great reversal” as “perhaps the best biblical commentary on this parable.”⁸

Fast forward to today, Blomberg stresses prayer to be real and contrite with faith and trust that Jehovah Jireh will satisfy their needs.

In John R. Donahue’s Book (The Gospel in Parable) Professor Donahue begins with Jesus intending to jolt the hearer at that time right from the beginning of the parable. A tax collector going up to the Temple to pray? A Jewish traitor helping the occupier overburden the country with heavy taxation? Not only does the Pharisee brag to God about himself being important in the relationship with Him, but he also intends to play up his prayer in trying to embarrass and shame the tax collector. He spews more rhetoric against the tax collector by telling God he keeps His laws and not “like the tax collector.”

Jesus points to the prayer of the tax collector with simplicity, nothing like the Pharisee. The cultural meaning for beating the breast is significant in demonstrating the awareness of guilt and being sorry of sinning against God. It is interesting to note that this simple act in itself is praying. It is in similar fashion to putting one’s hands together and the fingers pointed upward.

⁸ Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Second ed., Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2012. Pp.346

The tax collector throws off his sins to God, asks for His mercy, and goes home. “His hope is in God alone.”⁹

In Henry G. Covert book (*Discovering the parables*) he begins his commentary with a one-line synopsis that Jesus’ message was for those who are sure of their eternity and yet also feel they are above others. This is a continuing teaching statement from Jesus during his ministry. Covert deposits that Jesus’ instruction from the parable focuses on our character with regard to arrogance. It blocks a relationship with God and others and puts our fate in jeopardy. Therefore, Jesus calls for an ongoing prayer life seeking humbly His forgiveness. Covert highlights David’s prayer in Psalm 25 where he lays out his heart for God to search. Where am I blinded Lord is his call for God’s help. Since the sins of the world creep into our soul, so David wants to face them so that he can stand upright with God. Covert deposits that this comes from Jesus at the cross.

The tax collector shows us his “humility and honesty.” God longs for us to come to grips with this truth. When we look at Jesus’ life as a man, it is then that His message can resonate in our hearts.

In Darrell L. Bock’s exegetical commentary (*Book: Luke 9:51-24:53 vol 2*) Bock opens his commentary with the statement that this is not about eschatology. It is looking at the branch of theology of anthropology and soteriology. Wow!!! Why does he have to start off with a double dose on destiny? Yet, he immediately points to the entire salvific answer for eternal life, “humility,” and being confident in God’s mercy. The contrast in this parable is between the proud Pharisee and the humble tax collector. It is too early in the reading, but Bock posits the

⁹ Donahue, John R. *The Gospel in Parable*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988.pp190

theme of “justification is grounded in God’s mercy”¹⁰ but I hope he includes part two in the eternal relationship with God as being part of the “great reversal.”

Bock’s description of the Pharisee is more elaborate as he calls him being in the “misdirected state of self-confidence.” And he is in the state of illusion due to his own achievement which now God must accept. There is a point made by Bock that there was an understanding within the culture that the more open line of communication to Him would be from the Pharisee, of course. The Pharisee’s prayer would be similar to “I thank you, God, that I am such a great guy.”¹¹ Bock notes the speculation that the Pharisee’s boastful attitude regarding voluntary fasting could have been on Mondays and Thursdays which are the days Moses walked up and down Mt. Sinai. Because this is extra credit on the part of the Pharisee, God should be captivated by this exemplary conduct. Jesus’ disdain for these actions is the reason for His message to highlight the “great reversal” in shocking the hearers as Jesus told this story.

Bock contends that the tax collector’s “tone” is not the same as the Pharisee. He puts everything on the line with God and His mercy. And when Jesus says “I say to you” these words dramatize the big moment in the point of His message where it is the tax collector who is lifted up with the contrite heart. Bock says its simple, “God honors Humility.”¹² This is the “theological Principle”, approaching God with the right attitude. And yes, Bock does acknowledge the “spiritual reversal.” This is noted often in Luke’s gospel depicting God’s love for the poor, outcasts, sinners. This parable lies in conjunction with the “great reversal” where the first are becoming last and the “last are becoming first.”

¹⁰ Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Vol. 2, Baker Academic, 1996.p1458

¹¹ Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Vol. 2, Baker Academic, 1996.p1463

¹² Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Vol. 2, Baker Academic, 1996.p1465

Howard Marshall's book (the Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text), similar to his colleague Bock, Marshall straight away puts forth the point of this parable as he opens his commentary. In essence, God is willing to accept those to Himself who are humble and those who are needy. Interestingly, Marshall puts forth a slant in the "reversal" concept in that why should God elevate this message and put aside "Pharisaic Judaism" on the basis of one pharisee who let himself be corrupted in the way he approached God in prayer. He was devout in keeping the Law and contributing "to the coming of God's Kingdom."¹³ Marshall even plants a seed to the authenticity of this coming from Jesus but from a "Lucan Creation." Yet he does acknowledge that no evidence has yet been obtained.

Nevertheless, Marshall pushes forward with citing reasons for the Pharisaic character trait of self-confidence and exuding superior righteousness. In addition, Marshall attempts to list the tax collector above the other evil scoundrel men to a position of just being "simply contemptible."¹⁴ Would just a bad attitude and a contemptable demeanor be enough for the Pharisee to be put "last" in the order of the great reversal?

¹³ Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Paternoster Press, 1978. p678

¹⁴ Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Paternoster Press, 1978. p679

I think Marshall finally concedes or relents to the message boiling down to one conclusive point, “that the attitude of the heart is ultimately what matters”.¹⁵

¹⁵ Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Paternoster Press, 1978. p681.

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