

MATTHEW 18:21–35

A LESSON ABOUT FORGIVING (AN UNFORGIVING SERVANT)

Story Notes

File no. 130

The disciples needed to understand the kingdom of God, and this had much to do with receiving and giving of mercy and the humility associated with receiving it. Three people had come to Jesus as King or Messiah and had sought mercy (9:27; 15:22; 20:30f). Clearly, mercy was important in the kingdom, but it was not popularly understood (9:13; 12:7; 23:23). The disciples also had problems with mercy.

The events before the telling of this parable show that Peter was confronted with the reign of God's mercy in Christ. He had rightly understood that the reasons for going to someone with a complaint was not to get justice but that none of Christ's 'little ones' should be lost (v. 14), or the regaining of the one that had offended (v. 15). The reason for taking another witness or for involving the whole church was primarily to persuade the person to turn from their offensive and damning behaviour. Christ would be in their midst to this end.

Peter wanted to discover the boundaries of God's mercy. Rabbis taught that a repeat offender could be forgiven three times and Peter probably thought himself generous in offering seven times. The idea of open-ended forgiveness opened the prospect of him being abused beyond reason.

Jesus alluded to the anger of Lamech who said he would be avenged seventy times more than any enemy of his forefather Cain (Gen. 4:15, 24) Jesus was replacing the reign of vengeance with the reign of redemptive mercy. 'Seventy times seven' did not represent a limit but the abundance of mercy in the kingdom.

Through the story of a man wanting 'to settle accounts', Jesus reveals how eager his Father is to have no outstanding debts.

The first man has no chance of repaying his debt. 'Ten thousand talents' could be represented today by 'a billion dollars'. The amounts raised by their being sold as slaves would barely register as the beginning of a repayment of the debt. The man's situation is hopeless and he begs for time to repay everything, a ridiculous proposition. Rather, he is freely forgiven everything. The 'debt' (v.32) is referred to as a 'loan' (v. 27) and written off.

The violence (v.28), vengeance (vv. 29-30) and injustice (v. 31) of this man against a fellow slave highlights the awfulness of his action and his fellow slaves protest.

It was illegal to sell a slave, for at least 500 denarii, when this was more than the amount of his debt.

The action of the first slave is more than unjust. It is 'wicked'. It shows that he has no understanding or participation in the nature of his master's governance.

It is fearful to read the end of this story because Jesus is not concerned to make a fitting end to the story but to tell us the anger that is aroused in his Father (v.35) by a person who has so misjudged the reign of grace under which he or she has come to rest. They have no place in the kingdom of God, and must rather face, not just endless repayment but 'the torturers'.

Peter has learned that if it is hard to forgive, it is harder to contemplate the results of not forgiving his brother from his heart.

LUKE 10:1–23 (24)

Luke 9:51, 57–62;

JESUS SENDS OUT SEVENTY DISCIPLES

Story Notes

File no. 131

More people are needed to announce the coming of Jesus and the Kingdom and 70 are chosen. This may reflect the fact that Israel understood that the world was comprised of 70 nations, and so, signify that the Kingdom under Jesus would be proclaimed to them all. These men need to learn the principles of the kingdom by being involved in its proclamation. The harvest would always require more workers to reap it. The teaching around this prayer suggests that the labourers need not just recruiting but transforming so they are ready for the gracious work of the kingdom.

The Lord's instructions relate to the specific situation of Israel being confronted by their Messiah. His messengers should go urgently, not getting caught with lengthy civilities, and expecting to find people of peace who will support them; that is, true children of Israel. However, they may find themselves among wolves, and yet, they must still come as lambs, and bring peace. The blessing of God is being freely given to his people and nothing must confuse this message. The sign of the King's presence would be in healing and their words were to proclaim his nearness, near enough to be recognised and embraced.

Part of the witness of the disciples is to tell those towns who reject Christ that they are no longer part of Israel (shaking dust of one's feet is what Jews had learned to do when re-entering their land, lest they should contaminate Israel with foreign soil). They have been less responsive and in more danger than Sodom. Jesus shows the disciple what to do by announcing doom over the towns he has left behind in Galilee; they will suffer more grievously than Tyre and Babylon (see Isa. 14:13-15) and the connotation seems to be, because of their pride. They will not be elevated but debased to hell. The effect of this seriousness has as many implications for the messenger as for the city in danger; how important that the message is delivered and with all the grace brought by Jesus. Remember, at this point, there is to be no fire from heaven!

The seventy certainly find that the power of the King is real. Demons are no match for the name of Jesus. Jesus recognises Satan's fall from heaven in this kingdom work and says this power in his servants will be comprehensive, both for their protection, and to defeat the enemy, but the kingdom is not about this power but about belonging to the Father. That should remain their joy. (To have one's name recorded by God is to belong to him, to be acknowledged and saved by him and to be holy; see Ex. 32:32; Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27).

The prayer now given to Jesus by the Spirit illustrates the heart of the kingdom he has come to establish, and the kind of prayer that we also may pray. His joy is in the Father, not his successes. This, he realises, is wholly in the hands of the Father, and he reveals his truth to the powerless and unknowing infant and keeps it from those who are clever in their own eyes. Yet the whole kingdom is entrusted to the Son, the One the Father only knows. This is the intimacy that lies at the heart of God's kingdom, the Father knows his Son, and he knows all who are in his book! Only the Son knows the Father like this (knowing that he is known—cf. Gal. 4:9) but he, and only he, can bring us to know the Father in this way too. This is blessing indeed, unknown by prophets until now.

LUKE 10:25–37
THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Story Notes
File no. 132

On two occasions, Jesus is asked 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (here, and in 18:18-27). In both cases, the enquirers are directed to the law. However, the law is the way of love, and Jesus can see that this man knows little or nothing of love. He seeks to awaken a true awareness of his situation so that he will come to him, not as a critic, but in faith.

The Jewish lawyer is secure in his religious culture and feels he has a place from which to assess Jesus and his teaching, so his question is not sincere. However, Jesus gives an answer he has no grounds to dismiss: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself'. Jesus and his critic both accept the revelation of God to the Jews—the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), and the heart of what the commandments are about as stated by Moses (Deut. 6:5; 10:12). So far, they are in total agreement. To have eternal life, someone must do what God wants, or, better still, to be as God is, because the law is the way of God himself.

It could not be so simple, surely. The man wishes to explain his asking the question. Here lies the key to the story. He knows what to do to have eternal life but must justify himself. His heart is not certain. What does he lack? We may note that his opening question is close to the truth. He has confessed that eternal life is something to be inherited. That is, it depends on who he is as a son, not on what he does. But this is still beyond him.

Jesus answers the lawyer's question with a story about a Samaritan who cares for a victim of robbers, that is, a neighbour in need who has been bypassed by a Jewish priest and Levite. Jesus is saying that the Samaritan loves his enemy (the hostility of Jews and Samaritans was well established), whereas the Jewish leaders do not love their brother Israelite. The religious practice of Israel, represented by its leaders, has not fulfilled the commandment, but a Samaritan (whom they despise), has. So often, the people who accept Jesus are social outcasts (5:30; 7:34; 15:1).

The lawyer has asked who is his neighbour. This was obvious enough: the person alongside him and in need. The question Jesus answers is one the lawyer has not asked, 'Who was neighbour to the man in need?' He is obliged to answer the question with 'The one who showed mercy to him'. His own answer has taken him to the heart of Jesus' message. Jesus Christ had come to show mercy to those who have not kept the law. Those who receive mercy, even Samaritans, know how to offer it to another.

It is not the knowing of what is right that justifies us; it is doing it. But none can be justified this way. We need to know if there is mercy in God for our sins, and Jesus has come to answer this question and to bring that mercy to us.

At this point, the story stops. We don't know what the lawyer does next, but we are left with ourselves. None of us do what we know is right. We are not in a position to come to Jesus with a critical spirit, as though we were morally in charge. On the other hand, those who come to Jesus believe that he has come to 'show the mercy' God promised to Israel (1:72) and 'to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God' (1:77-78).

This parable is sometimes used to encourage us to be selfless. It certainly does describe the way of life in Christ, but the question asked had been about the way to life. People must receive mercy to have life, and then, receiving mercy, must share this with others. This questioner needs to learn the stinginess of his own self-justifying lifestyle, and the deceitfulness of the culture that supports it.

LUKE 10:38–42
MARY AND MARTHA
Story Notes
File no. 133

Mary and Martha live at Bethany (John 11:1; 12:1-3), only three kilometers from Jerusalem. This is Jesus' destination (9:51) but we do not need to think that his journey is nearly over. Luke is more concerned to put things together topically than he is chronologically, so this story is recounted now to carry forward the teaching of Jesus as to what is important in being his disciple.

If the lawyer of the previous story needs to learn what mercy is, Martha needs to learn that hearing the word of Christ is the most important thing. Jesus loves Martha and her sister (John 11:5) and his love for Martha is reflected in his repeated use of her name. Martha, however, mistakes her diligence in preparing food for true service, and, irritated by Mary who takes her opportunity to hear the Teacher, remonstrates with Jesus. Martha is distracted with serving. She is 'anxious and troubled about many things', or, more precisely, with her rights and status. Jesus will soon teach about avoiding the leaven of the Pharisees who place importance on 'doing the right thing' rather than trusting in God (12:1-7; c.f. Mark 8:14-21). Martha needs to know, unfair as may seem at this point, that Mary has chosen the better thing to do. When Jesus is here again (John 11:20-27), Martha is still the active one of the siblings, but there is no further word of rebuke from Jesus for her practicality.

If the lawyer is ever going to avoid his legal spirit, he will need to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn mercy. Receiving the word of mercy through Christ will always come before any service we may render.

At a later time, and as a seasoned apostle, Peter is caught being hypocritical with regard to Gentile believers (Gal. 2:12-13). It is interesting to notice then, that when he warns us to put away hypocrisy, he says it is with a view to longing for the milk of God's word like a newly born infant longs for its mother's milk (1 Pet. 2:1-2). Only this faith produces true love (Gal. 5:6).

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JOHN 9:1–41

THE MAN WHO WAS BORN BLIND

Story Notes

File no. 134

The Jews in this story think sickness and disability are punishments for sinfulness. The blind man or his parents must have done something wrong. Most societies probably have a form of this belief. But Jesus says, if this man has a disability, it is so God's works can be revealed in him. Jesus is about to do that work and those who see it must recognise Jesus as the light of the world. The present moment of opportunity will soon go—that is, the night will come. In a very simple way, this Light of the world now gives a man back his sight. All the blind man does is go where he is sent.

The cure arouses debate among neighbours, and then, the concern of the Pharisees. Is this really the blind man? If it is, what has happened in regard to his sins? And, what of the healer? He has done this work on a Sabbath, so he must be a sinner. The Pharisees can't agree on whether Jesus doing the miracle means God has accepted him as righteous, or whether his 'sin' of doing this on a Sabbath denies that the miracle happened. Their problem is that the witness is convincing! His parents, even though they want to be non-committal about Jesus, cannot deny the facts. But the authorities have already decided, on legal grounds, that if anyone confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, they will be excluded from membership of Israel, so they are careful.

The healed man is interrogated by the Pharisees but he speaks as though he is a disciple of Jesus (will you *also* be disciples?) and gives witness to what he has done. He turns to question them! They have their own legalistic interpretation of Moses' law, regarding work on the Sabbath. They accept that God spoke to Moses but wrongly claim that they will know where Messiah comes from if he is the true Messiah. In fact, the opposite is true (7:27). But the new disciple has clear evidence that God is working in Jesus. From the Pharisees point of view, the question posed at the beginning is now answered: the healed man is a sinner and always has been, and he is thrown out of the synagogue.

Jesus seeks out the healed man and wants to know if he now believes in 'the Son of Man', meaning 'Messiah' (see 1:51; 3:13; 5:27; 6:27; 8:28). The healed man is ready to believe the voice that has commanded him to wash his eyes at Siloam (he is seeing Jesus for the first time). He started calling Jesus 'from God', then 'a prophet', but now worships him as Messiah.

Jesus teaches (probably later) that his coming as Light of the world enables some to see and others to become blind, as a judgement (c.f. Isa. 6:10). Pharisees who hear this, ask if they are included among the blind. On their own confession, they are not blind, so Jesus, holding them to their claim, says their guilt remains. Yes, they are judged. Unless they repent and come to the Light, they are being blinded.

We may call this story 'Spot the sinner!' Jesus isn't, the Jews are, and for the blind man, it doesn't really matter any more. He has met Messiah.

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JOHN 10:1–18; 22–30

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Story Notes

File no. 135

Vv. 1-18

Jewish leaders have told a man, healed of blindness, that he is no longer welcome in their synagogue (chapter 9). But are these leaders true shepherds of God's people? In fact, the man has found a new identity as a disciple of Jesus. So Jesus says, with great earnestness, that sheep belonging to the *true* shepherd recognise his voice when he comes to the entrance or door of the sheepfold. He leads them and the sheep know they are safe. In other words, Jesus is the true shepherd of Israel. Those who don't come this way and talk to the doorkeeper only have their own interests in mind and will scare and scatter the sheep. Ezekiel warned of this earlier (Ezek. 34).

The leaders can't understand this, so, again, earnestly, he says he is the door of the sheepfold. He no longer thinks of a fold with numbers of flocks in it, but one flock in one fold and himself as both shepherd and door (or doorkeeper). Jesus says those who have come to the flock before him are thieves and robbers. He is not referring to many prophets and wise men of the Old Testament who have gone before him. They gave leadership that led to Christ. But Israel has also had bad leaders (Ezek. 34) and has them again now.

He also thinks of himself not only coming to collect his flock but of sheep coming to him as the door and him admitting them. He then becomes their shepherd. He saves his sheep and gives them abundant life. He is like Joshua in faithfully leading God's people (Num. 27:15-23).

Now, Jesus says plainly that he is the good Shepherd, the one referred to by Ezekiel (Ezek. 34:23). He is defined as being willing to sacrifice his life for the sheep, and to do so because the sheep are his own possession. False shepherds will never do this. Often, in this Gospel, Jesus has made it clear that his ministry as Messiah will involve his death, and this is made clear yet again.

Jesus says he knows his sheep and they know him. This is the outworking of the Father knowing the Son and the Son knowing the Father. Knowing indeed! And he repeats that he is willing to die for the sheep. This is what he knows with the Father—that the Father loves his sheep and wants him to die to protect them. Jesus will do this voluntarily but also because he is commanded.

The shepherd has still more to tell us. There are sheep not yet included in the 'fold' of Israel, namely, the Gentiles, and he must be shepherd for them too and make one flock of all these sheep. Again, the assurance of this is, his willingness to die for the sheep, the love of the Father for him for doing this, and the command of the Father that he lay down his life and take it up again. The whole wellbeing of the flock relies on this understanding of Father and Son that the Son will lay down his life for his people.

Vv. 22-30

As Israel celebrates the rededication of the temple after its defilement by a foreign conqueror (in 165 BC), they may be thinking of what hope Israel has for its future. They want their Messiah to come, but could Jesus be that one? They are witnessing Jesus revealing the Father, but won't acknowledge this, and can't hear the Father's call in his words. On the other hand, those who are shepherded by him are given eternal life by Jesus. No one can take them from his hand. No one can take them from the Father's hand either and he is greater than anyone. All this tells us that the Father and Son are, not only one in action, but also one in being God, a claim that has already been made (5:17-18).

LUKE 15:1–10
THE LOST SHEEP & COIN
Story Notes
File No. 136

'Tax collectors and sinners' have compromised their relationship with God by their behaviour and Israel's leaders show them no sympathy. These 'lost' people have not been able to find God in the toxic mix of law and self-righteousness dished up by the Pharisees and scribes. Now, Jesus is seeking them out and showing that they are included among those whom God will bless, by his teaching, and by eating with them. They are gathering in great numbers to hear what he has to say.

The parables tell the leaders what is really happening to these sinners, why it is right that he should enjoy being with them, and, pointedly, that, as leaders, they are out of step with what God thinks.

'What shepherd', Jesus asks, 'wouldn't seek out a lost sheep, even one of a hundred?' And then, 'What shepherd wouldn't come home delighted and want everyone to share his joy?' Those who listen to Jesus are not rejected but are treasured members of God's flock. They are Israel whom he is seeking (Matt. 10:6; 15:24; Luke 19:9-10; c.f. John 10:16). Why don't Israel's leaders share this task with him? These people are repenting of their sins, as is evident from them wanting to hear the word he speaks. The angels in heaven are delighted, and Jesus reflects this. So why shouldn't they be delighted too? His word has a barb in it: there is more joy for one sinner repenting than over 99 who don't need to repent. Who does not need to repent? Their grumbling arises because of their self-righteousness, and Jesus has not come for the righteous but for sinners (5:31-32).

When this story is recounted in Matthew (17:1-6, 12-14), failure to rejoice with Jesus that sinners are repenting is linked with the pride of wanting to be greatest on the one hand, and causing seekers to stumble on the other. We all need to be humble, like children, before the grace of God or cause serious damage to those the Father loves, and to ourselves.

The same eagerness to find what is lost is shown by a woman who loses one of her ten coins—each one the value of a day's wage. She may have had them strung together and hung around her neck, or gathered in a piece of cloth. Would she not seek for this eagerly, and, again, would she not expect everyone to share her delight in finding it? How wrong it is, then, that Israel's teachers cannot see and share in the finding of lost sinners. But then, how possible for them even now, to repent and take delight in the message of Jesus. He is as warm in love to those who are proud as he is to those who are lost, as becomes clear in the next story.

LUKE 15:11–32

Isaiah 53:6

THE LOST SON

Story Notes

File no. 137

The third story in this series of parables has the same point as the first two: 'It was fitting ... to be glad' (v. 32), but it goes to the heart of the Father's longing for all his sons and winsomely invites the angry Pharisees and scribes to discover the grace that would bring joy to them as well as to the publicans and sinners.

The younger son is utterly without regard for his father or for anyone else. He wants his inheritance immediately, effectively wishing his father were dead. (By law, he would be due for one third when his father died—Deut. 21:17.) He wastes no time getting away and goes as far as he can, to do as he wishes. There, he indulges the inheritance recklessly (acting like a Gentile) without regard even for his own future.

Then, his dilemma becomes pitiful. He suffers want, must feed pigs—a job he would regard as degrading, wishes he could eat their swill, and gets nothing. All this brings him to think of the home he has left behind—and the father he has sinned against. His return to his father may be wrenched from him by necessity but his repentance is stated fully and clearly. But then, the story is not really about him. It is about the father, and the people to whom it is addressed (v. 3). It is they who fit the category of the older son.

The father's compassion overflows (c.f. Hosea 11:8-9) and his extravagant expressions of affection probably bewilder the returning son. Running is not appropriate for an older man, and certainly not to a wayward son. The father doesn't wait for words of repentance, nor let him finish what he planned to say about being a hired servant. He is reinstated as a full son with the father's ring of authority on his finger, given the dignity of a cloak, and, to show he is not a slave, sandals for his feet. Then, he is welcomed with feasting. All this before the older son has time to find out what is happening. The father's reasoning is simple: my son is alive again! For him, life is not the indulgence of the younger son, or the legalism of the older one, but receiving all that he had to give them both as father (c.f. John 17:3.) The older son should understand that this is what the father would do. Even the servant gets the point and says 'Your brother has come.' But to the older son, this man is not a brother (v. 30).

The older son's moral world is turned upside down. He won't enter the house, and the father goes out to him. Now the son's anger comes to full expression. The waster gets a party, but his hard and faithful labour has never been rewarded like this. He sees his relationship to his father as the fruit of his own deeds rather than the Father's loving generosity. The father's view of their relationship is that this son is with him, and possesses all that he has. Possesses it moreover, to share readily with the returning brother as the father is doing now. Is not this what life is about?

The loud protest of the older brother is precisely the protest being expressed by the Pharisees and scribes, and Jesus calls them to see what they have in their Father (c.f. 6:36; 12:30, 32). We may say that Jesus is the true Elder Brother who knows the Father and is rightly welcoming the returning sons into the household. But self-righteousness runs deep in these leaders and their anger will ferment to the point that they will kill the teller of this story.

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LUKE 11:1–13

Matthew 6:5–15

‘LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY’

Story Notes

File no. 138

The disciples want a form of prayer appropriate to their new life with Christ. Jesus is happy to instruct them, but he spends more time encouraging them *to pray*. He knows that the greatest obstacle to prayer is not lack of method but lack of faith.

The prayer begins acknowledging God as Father. Israel was taught to come to God as a son-nation (Ex. 4:22-23), even as a people who were unworthy of that privilege (Isa. 63:8-10, 15-16). But now, Jesus teaches us to say 'Father' because he is revealing the Father to us (10:22; 15:24). We may pray to him in Jesus' name, and with the same acceptance that the Son's prayers have. When we are unsure that God is our Father, the natural instinct is to play to a human audience. Pharisees paraded their prayers. In fact, we have been made for God, and made to love God with all our heart. By this prayer, Jesus proclaims that we may know God personally, and come to him freely, as Father.

The Father's name is holy, but we are to acknowledge this and call others to do the same (as in Ps. 34:3). Nothing could be more important in this world than to acknowledge God and to desire him for who he is.

The Father reigns over all things. This was made clear to Israel, but Jesus now teaches us to desire and to ask for this kingdom to come to its goal, especially through the work that he himself does as Redeemer. The kingdom is, for us, as it was for Jesus, 'at hand' or 'upon' us, and upon those to whom we go with the message of Christ.

'Daily bread' covers all the needs of our physical existence, as the further teaching in Matthew demonstrates (6:25-34), including our length of life. No true living can happen for those who must still establish their own life. We are meant to be assured of the Father's care in all things.

The prayer for forgiveness is not a prayer for salvation but, rather, a request that God will continue to forgive us. Sin does not cease to be an issue for those who receive the grace of God. And, forgiveness is not something for us to presume on. We remain wholly dependent on the grace of God.

Forgiving others is not the price we pay for forgiveness, but an extending to others of what we have received. The parable Jesus tells elsewhere (Matt. 18:21-35) suggests that the forgiveness we offer to others is nothing alongside the forgiveness God has extended to us, so it should never be hard to forgive another. In fact, not forgiving others demonstrates that we have not received God's forgiveness ourselves.

We should not desire the 'challenge' that evil presents. Rather, we acknowledge our weakness in asking not to be led into temptation. The word can mean either temptation to sin, or difficulty that challenges our faith. We look to our Father to steer us away from evil, and then, to be delivered from evil, or the evil one, that is, the devil.

In summary then, disciples of Christ should pray as those whose only concern is for the Father's name, the Father's kingdom and will. Then, their physical needs, their guilt and their struggle with evil can all be brought and left with the Father.

Approaching God in prayer is likened to a troubled host needing extra bread when others have gone to bed. Jesus says a friend would hardly reject such a request, but, even if he did, he would respond if the host kept pestering him. Jesus is not teaching us that God is a reluctant donor, but he is telling us we need to believe in God and expect to get what we need. The matter is spelt out beyond all doubt. 'Ask! Seek! Knock! (These are all present imperatives signifying that we are to keep on doing these things.) Each request gets a corresponding 'Yes!' The promises are repeated in different words. You will get what you need. Then, God's nature is

'LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY' con't

put in stark comparison with our own family relationships. We are evil and know how to give good gifts to our children. What of our Father? He is not evil!

Jesus reveals the direction of what he is about by saying that the heavenly Father will give the Spirit to those who ask (not just 'good gifts' as in Matthew). John the Baptist has announced that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:16) and Jesus knows that this is the gift beyond all others that we need. He is given to those who ask for him to come!

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LUKE 18:9–14

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Story Notes

File no. 139

As Jesus continues his walk to Jerusalem, and to his cross, and as he continues to show the power of the kingdom by his words and actions, various encounters and parables show us how to respond to his presence.

Those who trusted that they are righteous were, in Jesus' day, Pharisees, so one of them features in the parable, but it could be any who are unaware of their own sinfulness and think themselves 'good enough' in their own right—good enough, that is, to pray. This attitude can never remain as self-contentment or self-congratulation, but spills over into looking down on others. Righteousness of this sort can only be comparative after all. It has no witness from heaven so must have others on which to look down in order to be sure of its own height.

Both men in the story have come to the temple. They believe, rightly, that God will meet people here (2 Chron. 6:38—7:3). One comes confident, not in God's promise, and not with repentance, but confident that he has done well with regard to the performance of righteousness. The rogues of the day, the people commonly despised for their evil deeds, were soldiers who demanded money under threat of torture (cf. 3:14), judges who didn't care about the poor (18:2), adulterers (possibly 7:39), and now, this tax collector who reaped more than his due because Rome left the whole business to tax farmers who worked with the single motive of profit. Every society has its rogues, those we 'love to hate' because it makes our own shortcomings seem unimportant. But this man, though addressing God, is talking to himself. His prayer is a self-congratulation, laced with the thrill of having others watch his self-adulation. He has gone beyond the tithing and fasting required by the law (once a year according to Leviticus).

The second man stands far off, far off from where the Pharisees stands in confidence, and so, probably, a long way from the entrance to the temple court or from where he may be seen. He, also, is conscious of himself but conscious of himself in the presence of God. His downcast look is not because he is not addressing God but because he is. He wants to meet God, not himself! He asks for what the temple worship is all about, propitiation, the averting of God's wrath. Time after time in the rules for sacrifice, we are told that people may bring their offerings to God to make atonement, and they will be forgiven (Lev. 4—6).

The second man has understood Israel's worship truly, and met God, and gone to his home forgiven by God. What Jesus has said concerning these two men in his story is true for everyone. Those who humble themselves before God are forgiven, but not those who are proud.

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