

AN UNEXPECTED ENDING

Luke 18:9-14

A friend of mine recently finished a series of novels by a favorite author. Of the six novels in the series, he gave the first five rave reviews: “Excellent writing,” he said. “Memorable characters. Strong plots. I can’t wait for the next book in the series.” But after reading the final novel, he expressed disappointment. “What was wrong?” I asked. “Was the storyline weak? Did one of your favorite characters die?” “No,” he said. “The storyline and characters were fine. I was disappointed by the ending. It wasn’t the ending I expected.”

That comment made me wonder: How many of the people who heard Jesus tell the *Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector* felt exactly the same—disappointed, even angry, at the unexpected ending?

Presumably, the listeners were thrilled by the introduction to the parable: “**Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector,**” 18:10. Thrilled, because they themselves were likely Pharisees; or at least, as Luke described them, “**some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,**” 18:9. From their perspective, any story about a Pharisee would be a good story with a good ending—meaning that, in the end, the Pharisee would receive praise from God and the tax collector would receive condemnation.

As the parable progressed, the main characters seemed to warrant these expectations and outcomes. When the Pharisee in the parable prayed, “**God, I thank You that I am not like other men,**” 18:11, perhaps the listeners smiled knowingly, thinking, “Yes, that’s right. That’s us. We’re not like others. We’re better than others.” When the Pharisee itemized his grandiose accomplishments—“**I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get,**” 18:12—perhaps they politely applauded.

However, when the narrative turned to the poor tax collector, who stood in the shadows, unable to lift his eyes heavenward while offering his simple prayer—“**God, have mercy on me, a sinner,**” 18:13; perhaps the listeners inwardly jeered, hissed, booed, and thought: “You’re right about that. You’re a sinner; and God would never have mercy on someone like you.”

To a person confident in his own righteousness, this parable of Jesus could have only one appropriate ending. Surely, whenever a Pharisee and tax collector stood before God, God always chose the Pharisee and despised the tax collector; or so these listeners thought.

Only, that is not how the parable ended. As Jesus explained, it was the tax collector who **“went home justified before God,”** 18:14; not the Pharisee. And at this unexpected ending, the listeners were stunned. They thought, “What? This can’t be. Jesus is wrong. Jesus has confused the two characters. In this parable the Pharisee is the ‘good guy’ and the tax collector is the ‘bad guy.’ And the good guys always win. This is not the ending we wanted or expected.”

Of course, the listeners did not expect such an ending, because they did not expect God to reject the religious Pharisee and to forgive the notoriously sinful tax collector. And they had no such expectations of God, because they did not understand God or His Word; as Jesus Himself told the Pharisees on another occasion—quoting from the very Old Testament Scriptures they professed to know: **“ ‘But go learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ ”** Matthew 9:13.

An unexpected ending. But should the ending of this parable really surprise us; knowing that God’s wisdom is diametrically opposed to, and infinitely higher than, Man’s wisdom? No. Paul told the Corinthians: **“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”** 1 Corinthians 1:20.

God Himself declared in Isaiah 55:8-9, **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”** Not surprisingly, therefore, God’s way to salvation is completely different from Man’s way. And God’s way is the only way that matters. God’s way is the only way that leads lost and condemned sinners to salvation.

Through the unexpected ending of His parable, Jesus taught two important truths about salvation; namely, that salvation is not based on who we are but on who God is; and that salvation is not based on our works but on God’s work in Jesus Christ. Let’s consider these great truths.

First, salvation is not based on who we are, but on who God is. Jesus taught this truth masterfully in His choice of characters for the parable; namely, a Pharisee and a tax collector; said differently, society’s best and society’s worst. For the Jewish people, the Pharisee really was the ‘good guy’ and the tax collector really was the ‘bad guy.’ And outwardly, at least, there was truth to this assessment.

Pharisees were the religious elite in Israel; the church-goers, alms-givers, law-keepers, hymn-singers, prayer-makers—some with great sincerity. Despite popular opinion, not all Pharisees were hypocrites. Some were serious about their devotion to the Mosaic Law. The apostle Paul was a former Pharisee, saying in Philippians 3:4-6,

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”

Not only were the Pharisees devoted to every jot and tittle of the Mosaic Law, they added hundreds of their own laws and traditions. They viewed themselves as a “cut above the rest;” as implied by the very name Pharisee—from the Hebrew PARASH, meaning ‘separated one.’ Recall the words of the Pharisee in the parable: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men,”** 18:11.

If the Pharisees represented the best of Jewish society, then the tax collectors represented the worst—despised not only for their profession, but for their corrupt practices. Most tax collectors in Israel were Jews in the employ of the hated, pagan Roman government. As such, they were viewed as collaborators, traitors, and even idolaters.

Unlike today, there were no laws regulating tax collection; no senate oversight committees, no codes of ethics, no plaques on the wall reading “our mission is to provide taxpayers with top quality service”—which is, by the way, the mission statement of the Internal Revenue Service. Abuses, extortion, strong-arming, and over-taxation were rampant. Indeed, at the time of Christ, tax collectors were permitted to use any method they chose, and to collect any amount they desired, as long as the Roman government received its share.

Hence, the character descriptions in the parable. And admittedly, apart from Scripture, one could make a side-by-side comparison of the Pharisee and tax collector and conclude, “Well, of course God will save the Pharisee. The Pharisee is a good person.” And humanly speaking, he was a good person—not the type of person you’d find on the FBI’s Most Wanted List; or as he put it, not a ‘robber, evildoer, adulterer, or even like that tax collector.’ To say the Pharisee wasn’t outwardly a good man is to diminish the meaning of Christ’s parable and the impact of its unexpected ending.

For Jesus purposely used the Pharisee in His parable to teach that God’s definition of good is far different from Man’s definition; and that when it comes to salvation, man’s good is never good enough. Simply read Psalm 14:2-3, **“The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”** To which this parable of Jesus would add, “not even one Pharisee.” You can see, then, why Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount: **“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the**

Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:20.

How many times have you and I have heard people say, “I believe that if I am a good person—a good parent, good spouse, good friend, good contributor, good employee, and overall good human being—God will take me to heaven”? On occasion, well-intentioned Christians have said to me, “Pastor Weis, will you pray for me? You’re a minister and that means God will be more favorable to your prayers than to mine.” What is that saying? It’s saying that God prefers me over another Christian because of my position; because of who I am. And isn’t that exactly what the Pharisee in the parable thought?

Our salvation is not based on who we are, but on who God is. The tax collector in the parable understood this; but ironically, the religious Pharisee did not. The Pharisee assumed God would save him because he was a good person. The tax collector believed that God would save him despite him being a bad person. The phrase **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”** 18:13, is more literally, “God, have mercy on me, the sinner”—as if he were the worst of sinners or the only sinner.

And why did the tax collector believe this? Because he knew who God was; the gracious, merciful God who forgives even the worst of sinners when they turn to Him in humility, repentance, and faith. The God whom King David described in Psalm 103 as the God **“who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s,”** Psalm 103:3-5.

Oh, what comfort Jesus offers us in this parable. On the one hand, while we can never be good enough to save ourselves; on the other hand, no matter who we are or what we’ve done, God will never fail to forgive us through Christ when we, like that tax collector, confess our sins and cry out to Him in repentance and faith: ‘Oh, God, I know who I am God; a wretched sinner. But I also know who You are; the God of mercy who forgives my sins in Jesus Christ.’ Such a person will, as Jesus said, go home **“justified before God.”**

Second, salvation is not based on our works, but on God’s work in Jesus Christ. According to one source, there are more than 4,200 religions in the world today. Yet, of all these religions, only one teaches that Man cannot save himself. Only one teaches that salvation is not by human works, but by divine grace; not by doing, but simply by believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And that one religion is Christianity, as taught by the Bible.

Every other religion, from Catholicism to Hinduism, from Jehovah's Witnesses to Mormonism—Islam, Scientology, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Judaism, Shamanism, Paganism, and a myriad of others religious “isms—teach that salvation must be obtained through human works; and if not through outright works like good deeds or reciting the rosary, then by more subtle works such as resisting God less or making an intellectual decision for Christ. These are human works, too.

And work-righteousness makes perfect sense to human reason and human nature; because as human beings we have to work at everything else—work to eat; work to pay bills; work to lose weight; work to improve a marriage. “Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go.” So, why can't we work our way to heaven? Why can't our works justify us before God?

Isn't this the very approach the Pharisee took in the parable? He went to the temple, stood before God, and began to boast about his religious accomplishments. “**I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get,**” 18:12. And he did, too. He was stating a fact. Indeed, the Pharisee did more than the Mosaic Law prescribed.

The Law required only one fast per year, on the Day of Atonement; but the Pharisee fasted twice each week. The Law required tithing only on agriculture and animals; but the Pharisee gave a tenth of all he owned. Admirable? Yes, but not 'savable;' that is, not a means to be saved. For despite all his good works, the Pharisee did not go home justified before God. The tax collector did. And for those to whom Christ told this parable; indeed for all those 'who trust in their own righteousness,' this was a stunning revelation. This was an unexpected ending.

In Christ's remarkable parable, the Pharisee was not only an example of how “good” can never be “good enough” before God; but also how human works—no matter how many or well-intentioned—can never justify us before God; can never lead us to salvation; and can never leave us with a sense of true peace.

Throughout his New Testament epistles, the apostle Paul condemned work-righteousness loudly, clearly, and repeatedly. Romans 3:19-20, “**Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteousness in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.**”

Or Romans 3:28, “**For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.**” Or Galatians 2:16, “**So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.**”

Or Galatians 3:10-13, **“All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’ The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ ”**

You realize, of course, that insofar as Christ’s parable is concerned, the Pharisee is still in the temple; still standing before God; and still trusting in his own good works to save him. The tax collector, however, who made no boast of personal deeds but instead confessed his personal wrongs and trusted in God’s mercy, went home justified and in peace.

And so through Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice on the cross, we too have an unexpected ending; that is, a glorious ending we had no right or reason to expect; the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation.

And that is an ending that will never disappoint us. **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**