

Thursday 6th August 2020

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Luke 18:9-14

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector looks at first glance to be a warning about pride and self-importance. But what is important is not the pride of the Pharisee in itself but rather what he is boasting about. The real essence of this story is that we cannot save ourselves but that we are wholly dependent on God for our salvation.

When the Pharisee prays this way, we must at least commend him for his realisation that he needs to do something to make himself right with God. He is searching for validation from God because he recognises that he is imperfect, that he has fallen short. But he wrongly believes that righteousness (in other words, becoming "right with God") is something he can achieve if he just tries a little bit harder than others to do the right thing. Pharisees were notable for the excesses they followed in the observance of ritual. This Pharisee fasts twice a week, whereas the Law only mandated fasting once a year (Leviticus 16:29-30) and he gives a tenth of everything he receives (not just the more limited tithe that is stipulated in Deuteronomy 14:22-23).

But to think that he has it within himself to obtain righteousness, that he is able to set the record straight, is to underestimate woefully the chasm between the perfect righteousness of God and the sinful nature of man. No man has the power to broach that gap on his own (and, even if he had, one has to imagine it would need significantly more than simply fasting and tithing). Instead, the only one who can is God himself, through Christ, to whom our sins were imputed and whose righteousness is then imputed to us.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21)

The tax collector, however, is in no doubt of how far he has fallen short. Unlike the Pharisee, he recognises that he is utterly dependent on God. The Pharisee asks for nothing from God and he receives nothing in return. The tax collector, instead, pleads for mercy; God, in return reaches out and bestows it upon him.

We must always keep in mind the fact that our salvation is wholly dependent on God's grace and our faith, not on our works.

"But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." (Titus 3:5).

That does not mean we are not expected to do good works - we are all called to do them. But these good works are simply a natural expression of our changed minds when we experience saving faith.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith (and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God) not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Eph. 2:8-10)

As Christians we are all required to do good works in God’s name, but we do this not to earn our salvation but in response to our salvation.