

**NO RELATIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

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John Ortberg writes:

**Many years ago, there was a CEO of a Fortune 500 company who pulled into a service station to get gas. He went inside to pay, and when he came out he noticed his wife engaged in a deep discussion with the service station attendant. It turned out that she knew him. In fact, back in high school (before she met her eventual husband), she used to date this man.**

**The CEO got in the car, and the two drove in silence. He was feeling pretty good about himself when he finally spoke: “I bet I know what you were thinking. I bet you were thinking you’re glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a service station attendant.”**

**“No, I was thinking if I’d married him, he’d be a Fortune 500 CEO and you’d be a service station attendant.” (John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason*, 1998)**

We look at three words today to learn a lesson from our Lord found in Luke 18:9-14.

**I. The first word is pride.**

**Kim Hubbard once said, “There is no secret about success. Did you ever meet a successful man who didn’t tell you about it?”**

Look at verses 9-12

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: Swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’”

The part of the funeral where the pastor speaks kindly of you is called the eulogy. It comes from the classical Greek for “good words.” The eulogy is when someone shares good words about us.

The odd thing about this Pharisee’s prayer, this religious man’s prayer, is that he offers a self-eulogy. My grandmother would have said, in the language of the south, “the boy was tootin’ his own horn.”

Do you notice all the “I’s in this prayer? Look at verse 11: “The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself.” Praying to himself? I thought the whole purpose of prayer was to speak with

God. The reality is that's not a bad description of this prayer; it never made it to God because of the Pharisee's self-proclaimed goodness. It was a prayer to himself, not to heaven.

So we start with the word "himself," then "*I thank God I am not like...I fast twice a week...I pay tithes of all I get.*" Notice he doesn't ask God for anything in this prayer. He doesn't need to petition God for anything because he doesn't even need God. He's so good in himself, he's godless.

Verse 9 – he trusted in himself (trusted in themselves).

It's really a distorted praise psalm. "I thank you, God, that I am so great." He made himself both the subject and the recipient of his own prayer. God is left out from beginning to end.

In his prayer, he reports to God what he has done and what others have not done. He's on the Lord's side. He's not like those who dishonor God by violating the ten words, the Ten Commandments. Robbers. Evil-doers. Adulterers. Notice the contempt in verse 11. "This tax gatherer."

He fasts twice a week. In fact, fasting was actually only required on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29; 31:23, 27, 29:32; Numbers 29:7). But this Pharisee goes beyond what was enjoined in scripture by fasting twice a week.

Jewish piety had become proverbial in the Greco-Roman world since Suetonius used the phrase "not even the Jew fasts so scrupulously." Unlike this Pharisee, Jesus and His disciples were not known for fasting but, rather, for eating and having fellowship with those who were of ill-repute.

He also gives an additional one-tenth of whatever he buys. He goes to the extreme as a precaution in case a producer had not paid the proper tithes found in Deuteronomy. That way, if the other guy didn't tithe, your extra tithe makes sure it's covered.

You know, the honest truth is that we are proud and self-centered by nature. Humility is an unnatural trait. Pride is what comes with ease.

Here is how we gain our pride. We compare ourselves to our neighbors, giving ourselves all benefit of the doubt, being harsh to our neighbors in judgment against them. We stand like this pious, prideful Pharisee and proclaim that we're not as bad as the next guy. "I thank God I'm not like you. I'm not like the dude who is a drunkard. I'm not like the girl with greed. Lord, any way you slice it, I tithe. I'm faithful to my family. Don't abuse my children. I'm just a cut above my neighbor."

By comparing ourselves to our negligent neighbors and not God's righteous requirements, we feel better about ourselves than we ought to.

Have you ever caught yourself using the words, "At least I don't..."? When you begin a sentence comparing yourself to somebody else by saying "At least I don't...." you've already succumbed to

the temptation to lift yourself by tearing another down. “At least I’m not as bad as the next guy,” you’re saying.

In comparing ourselves to our neighbors and not to God’s righteous requirement, we feel better about ourselves than we ought to. God, however, compares you to His sinless Son, and to no one else. And when compared to the Christ, you and I don’t measure up to the Messiah.

God is not going to grade on the curve.

Perhaps you’ve had one of your college kids report, “Dad, I’ve got some bad news and some good news.”

“Well, what’s the bad news?”

“I made a 60 on my chemistry test today.”

“Oh, that’s bad news. I’m ready to hear some good news.”

“Well, the highest grade in the class was a 65. And therefore, when it’s all graded on the curve, I’m right there with an A.”

That might work for a college class, but it doesn’t work when it comes to God. God grades based upon His perfect moral law. He doesn’t compare you to the next guy. He compares you to the sinless Christ.

By comparing ourselves to the low standards of our neighbors, we’re like the growing child who proclaims to his mother that he is seven feet tall. She watched as he counted the seven on his homemade measuring tape: “See, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Mom, I’m seven feet tall.” But his feet were not 12 inches. To himself, he appeared to be taller than he really was because he was using a homemade ruler – a skewed standard of measure.

That little boy was like the Pharisee. That little boy is we ourselves as we make an overestimation of our own goodness.

Don’t you see what’s going on here? Each one thinks he is better than his neighbor. And if every one of us in this room thinks that we’re better than the average guy, then who is the average guy?

**Studies show that nine in 10 managers rate themselves as superior to their average colleagues. In the same way, nine out of 10 college professors think they are better than the other professors. Everybody can’t be better, but everybody thinks they are better. Professor of psychology, David Myers, says that most drivers – even those who have been hospitalized after accidents – believe themselves to be safer and more skilled than the average driver.**

**Regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status or ethnic background, deep down inside we all believe that we are above average. ([www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com))**

This is the way it happens. We judge others by a different standard than we use to judge ourselves. When it comes to judging ourselves, we know our inward motives. We give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We know why we didn't meet the standard, why we cut the corner. So we cut ourselves some slack. When we judge others, we judge harshly, censoriously, critically, denying them every benefit of the doubt as we hold them up to the perfect standard of measure – the very one that we could not attain. We hold them up to the paragon of perfection.

And feeling pretty good about ourselves, we like to brag.

An elderly minister who survived the great Johnstown Flood of 1889 loved to regale audiences with tales of that harrowing event. When he died and went to heaven, he found himself in a meeting of saints who were sharing their life experiences. He took St. Peter aside and asked if he could tell about surviving the Johnstown Flood. Peter hesitated, then said, "Well, you can tell your story, but just keep in mind that Brother Noah will be in the audience."

There is something in our fleshly nature that tempts us to talk about ourselves—how big, tall, great, smart, wealthy, fast, wise we are. Or how great our children are. And man, don't even get some of you started on your grandchildren. In fact, we might even boast about how humble we are. Ted Turner, CNN founder and former Atlanta Braves owner, said, "If I only had a little humility, I'd be perfect." ([www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com))

God says (Isaiah 64:6) that our great deeds are nothing but filthy rags in His eyes.

## **II. The second word is humility.**

Look at verse 13.

But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Don't imagine for a moment that these are two guys going into a quiet house of worship, with no one else around but the two of them or a small group of folks at the front. This was a public time of prayer.

There were two periods for public prayer in Jewish life: the third hour, 9 a.m., and the ninth hour, 3 p.m. (see Acts 3:1). A Jewish audience hearing this parable would assume that this was corporate worship, just like here this morning at First Baptist Church.

And into this gathering of the proud and the pious comes the tax gatherer. He belongs to the class associated with notorious sinners. Instead of taking the Lord's side, he's chosen to take the Roman side by serving their system of tax collection.

He stands at a distance from the gathered crowd because he doesn't think he's worthy to stand with God's people before the altar. Perhaps he's heard Psalm 24 – he has neither clean hands nor a pure heart and doesn't belong, really, on God's holy hill. He's spiritually far away and painfully aware of this distance from God.

Normally, one would lift one's eyes to heaven to pray (see Psalm 123:1; Mark 6:41; Mark 7:34; John 11:41; 17:1). The tax gatherer does not even lift his eyes before God because of his sense of shame.

He beats his breast – an extreme sign of sorrow, an action normally reserved for women at funerals (see Luke 23:27). It was rare for a man to have such a display of sorrow (see Josephus Ant. 7.10.5 252).

The Pharisee sees himself as the righteous one, but look at verse, as this man sees himself as “the sinner.” It means he's the worst of all sinners. He is “the sinner.”

He calls on God to have mercy on him. It means, “God, somehow make provision for my sins because I can't pay for them myself.”

**Humility is an odd thing. If you start talking about it, it leaves. If you even ask the question, “Am I humble?” it is not to be so. Examining your own heart, even for pride, often leads to being proud about your diligence and circumspection. C.S. Lewis said humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less. Don't worry about yourself. Don't notice yourself. Don't even criticize yourself. For when you're always critical of yourself, you're still doing it. You're thinking about self. Don't always notice how others are treating you or try to find slights in the way you are being treated. If you feel slighted all the time by the people around you, that means you have a great estimation of who you are and how you should be treated.**

**Humility is a blessed self-forgetfulness.**

**Humility comes by believing in the gospel. In the gospel, we have confidence not in ourselves, but we have confidence in Christ (Romans 3:22-24). The gospel frees us from having to always look at ourselves. Our sin is great – we know it. It takes the death of Jesus to save us. He died for us.**

**We must be careful of being prideful of our own morality. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes, “If we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good – above all, that we are better than someone else – I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the Devil.”**

**In fact, Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York, says, “I think it is fair to say that humility, which is a key differentiating mark of the Christian, is largely missing in the church today. Nonbelievers, detecting the stench of sanctimony, turn away.” (Tim Keller, “The Advent of Humility,” *Christianity Today*, December 2008)**

Christianity is not moralism. It is grace. People will reject moralism, but they won't reject grace, if they understand it.

**III. The third word is grace.**

Notice Luke 18:14.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.

In verse 14, we see, “I tell you....” There is a Christological claim in these words. Jesus claimed to know the mind of God. “I can tell you who God is going to accept. Not the one you think in this story.”

Jesus picks up in verse 14 on the contemptuous use of “this.” The Pharisee had said in verse 11, “I’m glad I’m not like *this* tax gatherer.” And Jesus says, “It is *this* man [meaning the tax gatherer] who went down to his house justified; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Philippians 2:3-8

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Grace really is a hard concept – that a murderer can have a seat at the table of God because he finds forgiveness in Christ while a liar is separated forever from the throne of God.

Grace has always been a scandal. It’s not based on how good we are or what we do. It is based upon our humble, repentant spirit which allows us to quit trusting in ourselves and really trust in the Christ of the cross.

Now, can you think really deeply with me for a minute. There is a way in which, today, the parable has reversed and the tax gatherer is the prideful one and the Pharisee is the humble one.

The two men have changed places in today’s culture. I don’t know how many times I’m called upon to respond in the newspaper or to someone’s email concerning someone who thinks they don’t need religion, meaning the church. The oddity now is that we have the tax gatherers on the outside, looking at us Pharisees on the inside, saying, “You know, I’m glad I’m not like the Pharisee who are at church, the hypocrites who are at church. I’m better than they are.”

The tax gatherer today – that is, the common sinner – has lost his humble character. For now, rather than looking on religious folks as superior and more holy, now the common sinner looks down his long nose at folks in the stained glass room.

So before you jump on the band wagon, throwing stones at those who try to be obedient to God's word and worship Him in His house with His people – the minute you do that, you're no longer the tax gatherer. You become publican of pride.

So there you have it. Pride, humility, and grace. You can have the first one, but not the third one. But the second and third go quite nicely together – humility and grace.