

Why are so many Christians hypocrites?

Tough Questions, Part 2

Luke 18:9-14

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 7 May 2006

Introduction

Last week we started a series entitled *Tough Questions*, a series based on Jesus' parables in the gospel of Luke. The question we looked at last week was this: Would a loving God send people to hell? Another tough question asked by many people outside the church is this: Why are so many Christians hypocrites? It's a common question, a common criticism. The great German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said, "I will believe in the Redeemer, when the Christian looks a little more redeemed." Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like their Christ. I don't like their Christians." In the television series, *Blackadder II*, there's a scene where the baby-eating bishop of Bath and Wells says this, "Never have I encountered such foul, mindless perversity! Have you considered a career in the church?" Why is it that for so many professing Christians their faith – their worship – seems to make no difference whatsoever to the way they live their lives. Why is it that so often we're the most critical and ungracious people of all? Let's take a look at a parable that Jesus told in Luke 18:9-14 (p. 1016).

In this parable, two men go up the temple in Jerusalem to pray. Both went home no doubt believing that they had prayed. But while one of them certainly did business with God that day, the other one – in spite of his good intentions – did not. The text says of the Pharisee that he "prayed about himself" (v11). It could equally be translated, he "prayed to himself." He was talking to himself. His prayer was just one long soliloquy. Jesus is saying that it is quite possible to come to church thinking that you want to meet with God, and leave believing that you have done so, and all the time you're deceiving yourself. It's possible to worship in a way that makes no difference whatsoever to the kind of person you are, or the kind of life you live. It's possible, in short, to be a hypocrite – and not even know it. How is that? And what can we do to avoid that? Let's try to get beneath the surface of this parable to hear what he's saying to us, because Jesus outlines in this parable some vital lessons about the true nature of religion – the real nature of prayer, guilt, and righteousness.

The real nature of prayer

First, let's ask the question, "What was so wrong with this Pharisee's prayer, and what was so right about the tax collector's prayer, that God's assessment of them should be so radically different? The answer is not difficult to spot. Notice how the Pharisee begins: "God," he says, "I thank you that I am not like other men" (v 11). Can you imagine me going to my doctor and saying, "Doctor, I want you to know from the start that I am in superb physical condition. My muscle tone is perfect. My digestion, my circulation couldn't be better. I have no infections, no conditions, no ailments. In short, doctor, unlike the rest of the miserable specimens in your waiting room, there's absolutely nothing wrong with me at all." What could that doctor do for me? I would leave the surgery unchanged, unimproved in any way. I would receive nothing because I asked for nothing. Jesus once said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Mathew 9:12). This Pharisee is a perfect example. As the evangelical Christian of his day, orthodox in this view of Scripture, scrupulous in his obedience of the law, a model of holiness, he came to the temple simply to congratulate himself on his spiritual and moral health. He hadn't really come to pray at all.

The tax collector, by contrast, is under no illusion about his moral and spiritual condition. Tax collectors in first century Israel were crooks. This man had made himself rich by exploiting his fellow countrymen, collaborating with the Roman enemy. He is fully aware of the disease of his soul. He feels his need. And the text says he beats his chest with the sense of it (v 13) – a gesture that Jews made only in times of profound anguish and sorrow – and he cries out, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Yet, Jesus says, that's the kind of prayer that God hears. That's the sort of worshiper who goes home a different person, whereas morally complacent, for all their eloquent supplications, leave the house of God in exactly the same state in which they arrived. I wonder if this question of personal felt need is the issue for many of us. How desperate are we for God's grace? Why do we come to church? Thirty or forty years ago Charles Schultz, the creator of the *Peanuts* cartoon series, suggested that most people attending church on Sunday do so with the same attitude that they attend the theatre or the cinema: simply to enjoy what's going on, to be entertained. It's true. Most of the debate between contemporary music or traditional music, a reflective atmosphere or an exuberant atmosphere is just a question of personal preference. What we like. This tax collector didn't go to church to enjoy it. He went there as a sick man goes to a doctor. We will never have real dealings with God until we get beyond our consumer mentality and reach the point of felt need, which that tax collector had reached. Then we will pray, and get answers.

The real nature of guilt

That brings us to the second feature that Jesus highlights in this paradoxical little story: the issue of guilt. It's ironic: There was the tax collector feeling guilty, yet Jesus says he went home justified before God. There's the Pharisee feeling innocent, and Jesus implies he went home condemned. Guilt is not just a feeling. It's fact. An objective reality. Our society, though, would disagree. We've come increasingly to regard guilt as a symptom of emotional illness or mental abnormality, rather than an appropriate moral response to personal sin. So, no longer do we send a guilt-stricken person to church for confession. We send them to a psychiatrist, for treatment. Right? I actually wonder whether we tend to think of church and faith itself as nothing more than an alternative form of such treatment. This Pharisee's religion was just a form of psychotherapy by which he got rid of his guilt feelings. Look at the techniques he uses. I can pick out three:

- First of all, he focuses on **comparative obedience**. He says, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men ... like this tax collector" for instance (v 11). This is a very effective method of guilt-avoidance. There are always people more guilty than ourselves. By this kind of comparison many of us will probably succeed today in avoiding the chastening effect of this very parable on our lives. I heard about a Sunday School teacher who told this story to his class. Afterwards, to draw out what he thought was the obvious moral lesson, he said to his class, "Now kids, let's thank God that we're not like that proud Pharisee." It's so easy for us, in the very act of trying to distance ourselves from the Pharisee, to slip into his very shoes without even realising it. And we become like one of those unloving, hypocritical Christians "who look down on everybody else" (v 9).
- A second technique of the Pharisee is to focus on **negative obedience**. He pacifies his conscience by reflecting on all the sins he hasn't committed (v 11). He says to himself, "I don't steal. I don't commit adultery. I'm a good person." But the problem is that, by defining obedience in purely negative terms, we might escape feeling guilty, but we end up presenting the Christian faith as a joyless series of "Thou shalt nots."
- The third classic method of guilt avoidance used by this Pharisee is **legalistic obedience** (v 12). He lists all the good works, which he doesn't really have to do at all, like fasting twice a week (when Moses said once a year was quite enough) or giving a tithe – a tenth – of absolutely everything he had, even the herbs in his kitchen (when Moses said a tithe of one's income was adequate). By carefully observing a number of petty rules which we set for ourselves – rules which we know we can fully keep if we try hard enough (not drinking, not gambling) – we think we're compensating for any real sins we may commit. But it's like appearing in the District Court and saying to the judge, "Yes, I did drive at 100 kmph down Kitchener Road last month, but unlike some people I never park on a yellow line. Surely you can take that into consideration." It's quite illogical.

But it works. By each of these three classic techniques the Pharisee succeeds in feeling good about himself. His guilt feelings have been completely repressed. But Jesus insists that his real guilt remained. He might have been more emotionally stable as a result of his religious exercises, but he was nearer hell. What's to say that we may not be suffering from the very same delusion?

This issue of how we handle our guilt was brought home to me when I read this week about a young university student who had had an abortion to avoid the inconvenience of a pregnancy that would interrupt her studies. To her surprise, she found herself overwhelmed by guilt after the operation. So devastated was she by what she had done, that she even attempted suicide. Lots of her friend said to her, "Don't be silly. You're just suffering from some form of post-natal depression. It's just medical. Your hormones. You've got nothing to feel guilty about. Some of her colleagues were studying psychology. They had analysed her guilt feeling in terms of Freud and Jung. She herself was a social scientist and was well aware of the argument that all moral convictions are just the result of social conditioning. But she still felt guilty. No amount of rationalising would take the feeling away. She had discovered what many of us succeed in hiding from themselves: guilt is real. It's not a mental abnormality or a psychological aberration. It's a moral stain on your life. What that young lady wanted was not some therapy to make her feel better. She wanted forgiveness. She'd reached the same place of personal desperation as the tax collector in this parable. He didn't rationalise or repress his guilt away. Standing at a distance, sensing his unworthiness, he simply begged, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (v 13). And the result, says, Jesus, is that "this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (v 14). The word "justified" doesn't come from the world of psychotherapy. It comes from the world of law. It describes not how the tax collector felt, but how he stood legally before God. Just as a judge might acquit an accused person, so God had declared this man innocent. What Jesus is saying in this story is that justification – peace with God, the cleansing and transforming of our lives – is what true religion is all about.

The real nature of righteousness

This brings us to the fundamental difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector: the grounds upon which they sought acquittal in the eyes of God. There are two kinds of righteousness. The Pharisee was one of those who, Luke observes, "were confident of their own righteousness" (v 9). He could make it heaven by his own efforts. The tax collector, by contrast, knows that his only hope is God. He prays, "God, have *mercy* on me." Now "mercy" is a weak translation, for the word in the original is not the normal word for "mercy" at all. If we were to translate it accurately into English, we'd have to use an old-fashioned phrase like, "Turn your wrath away from me." Take away my sins. It's a word associated with the sacrificial ritual of the temple. Remember that the tax collector is standing in the temple. His eyes are on the altar where the priest at the hour of prayer has just offered a sacrificial lamb for the sins of the people, a sacrifice prescribed by the law. So the tax collector is not just appealing to God's loving and compassionate character. He is laying claim to God's own remedy for sins. He's saying, "God, I see the bloodstains on the altar. That animal died in my place today. So accept that sacrifice on my behalf. Turn your wrath away from me. Forgive me."

In so doing, the tax collector highlights one more vital lesson that our morally complacent world too easily forgets: There can be no real assurance of pardon without an acceptable sacrifice. Some people think that forgiveness is easy for God. There's a cynical French proverb that goes like this: Of course God will forgive me; that's his business." That's what God does. It's easy for him. Not so. Because God is God, it's dreadfully difficult for him to forgive our sins. He hates sin, and all the damage it does to us. The integrity of his righteousness means that he disassociates himself from wickedness wherever he sees it. The penalty of sin is separation from God. Death. That's why in the Old Testament times there had to be an altar, there had to be a sacrifice. Forgiveness may be free. But don't ever think it comes cheap. The tax collector realises that and cries out, "God, I realise the seriousness of my sin, the penalty it deserves. But I see the blood. I see the sacrifice you prescribed. Accept that sacrifice on my behalf. Have mercy on me, a sinner."

Now let me ask you a question. Have you sought God's pardon the tax collector's way, through God's merciful provision of an atoning sacrifice? Or are you still seeking a righteousness like the Pharisee's, a righteousness built on your own moral achievement? I think the fact is many of us – many professing Christians who come to church regularly to pray – are more like that Pharisee than the tax collector. Instead of resolving our guilt God's way, we try to comfort ourselves by comparing ourselves favourably to others, or obeying a set of rules. But our hearts haven't changed. Our lives aren't changed. Our religious exercises are making no difference. The truth is, we're hypocrites.

What's the answer? We need to come and stand where the tax collector stood, all our illusions of moral respectability and self-righteousness abandoned. We need to look where he looked, to a sacrifice, but a far more costly sacrifice than was ever slain on the temple altar. We need to look to a cross where the Son of God shed his blood, once and for all, to make atonement for the sins of the world. And we need to pray as that tax collector prayed: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I know that the penalty of sin is death. But a worthy substitute has paid that penalty in my place. So have mercy on me, a sinner." And most of all, we need to hear that reassuring verdict of Jesus upon such a prayer, "I tell you the truth, this man ... went home justified before God" (v 14).

Questions

1. Have you ever heard someone say, "I'm not interested in church. It's full of hypocrites"? How would you respond?
2. Some studies show that very few people experience a sense of God's presence in church services? Do you regularly experience God's presence and transforming power in worship? If not, why do you think that might be? Why do you think we can often be like the Pharisee and walk away from times of prayer and worship without having really met with God? Take a look at Luke 1:53.
3. Have you ever been stricken with a profound sense of guilt? How was it resolved?
4. How would you respond to someone who says that guilt is just (a) the result of social conditioning, or (b) just a symptom of emotional illness or mental abnormality?
5. Do you think we try to "self-medicate" our feelings of guilt? Can you see ways in which we use each of the Pharisee's techniques: (a) comparative obedience, (b) negative obedience, (c) legalistic obedience?
6. Martin Luther once wrote, "There are two sorts of people in the world: sinners who think themselves righteous, and the righteous who think themselves sinners." What do you think? Which are you?
7. This parable forms part of a section (18:9-19:27) devoted to the question: How to enter the kingdom of God. A few verses later Jesus says, "Anyone who will not enter the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." What do you think he means by that?

Acknowledgement

This message is largely drawn from a brilliant little book on the parables in Luke by Roy Clements: *A Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995).