

Father, take my words and make them yours. Take our ears and let us hear you. Take our hearts and make them open to listen. Amen.

Thank you, Lord, that this passage doesn't apply to me. I've had theological training so I know how to interpret the bible and avoid mistakes like this Pharisee. I have a daily quiet time, and go to Church every Sunday, sometimes more than once. I'm on the PCC and do various other jobs around Church, all on top of a full time job. Thank you that I'm a thoroughly committed Christian unlike some of these others.

When it's put like that, it sounds crazy that anyone would think like that and even crazier that anyone would pray in public like that. But, Jesus is telling a story, we need to dig a bit deeper to see what He is trying to say through this story. Let's start by looking at when Jesus told this story and who he was speaking to.

This story is only recorded by Luke, who was writing this account of Jesus' life for a Gentile audience. We often find that Luke includes stories when those the Jews would consider "outsiders", women, children and gentiles receive praise or blessings from Jesus. In this story it's a tax collector, the Judean equivalent to City Bankers today, the people everyone loves to hate.

It appears just after the story of the widow and the judge that we looked at last week, a story of the helpless receiving justice from the powerful because she was not ashamed to keep pestering him for what he should have been providing anyway.

Finally, it was addressed, according to Luke, "to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else". We

can't be sure who these people were, but, considering what we see of the Pharisees in the rest of the gospels, we can surmise that they would be likely to be included in this group.

So, having looked at the setting of this story, what can we understand from what Jesus actually says? Jesus talks about 2 men going to pray. Devout Jews would pray 2 or 3 times each day, in the morning and evening, and sometimes at noon. Prayers offered at the Temple were considered more effective and so at the times of prayer, the temple would be busy. They both separated themselves from the crowds, one to stand clear so that everyone could see him and hear what he had to say, and the other to be able to be alone with his despair.

We are not told, but you can imagine that the first would have prayed in what my Dad, or any other teacher, would call a "playground voice", a voice designed to carry. He wanted people to hear about how good he was. The tax collector we can imagine almost whispering, his was a prayer that was meant for God alone to hear.

Finally, Jesus tells us that it was the tax collector that went home right with God. Because the tax collector realised that he needed God's forgiveness, he received it. The Pharisee didn't see anything in his life that required God's grace and so it was not given.

What does this mean to us, other than to tell us that I got it wrong at the beginning?

The first thing I'd like to say is very similar to something I said last time I preached. We were looking at how wealth can affect us and

I said that how rich we were depended on who we compared ourselves to. It's the same with our righteousness or spirituality. If I compare my righteousness against a drug-taker that steals in order to pay for his drugs, then I would actually be almost entitled to feel like the Pharisee, "I'm doing alright here". If I compared myself to the majority of people that attend churches, I'd probably still not see too much to feel bad about.

However, what we have to remember is that God does not compare us to other people, however good or bad they are. God compares us to himself. "The question is not 'Am I as good as my neighbour', the question is 'Am I as good as God'" (Barclay 266). He is looking for perfection and anything less than that is a failure.

That is why, every week at the beginning of the service we acknowledge that we have fallen short of God's standards. We can sometimes find ourselves just reciting the words, but I find the confession we use during Evensong at St. John's really quite powerful. It starts:

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done;
and there is no health in us.
But thou, O Lord, have mercy on us miserable offenders.*

The language is far from modern, but it does emphasise in a way that the confession in our morning Eucharist doesn't, just how far we have fallen from what God expects.

This has an important impact on how we greet other people, particularly non-regulars that come into church. We may look at them and think that we are much closer to God than they are, but, compared to where God wants us to be, there's no appreciable difference. It's like getting a meter head start when walking from Land's End to John O'Groats.

The second thing I would like to consider is God's response. The evensong confession continues:

*Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.
Restore thou them that are penitent;*

"If we confess our sins to God ... he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing." (1Jn 1:9). God sent His son to die in our place so that he had a way to forgive us. Having made the effort to provide a means for our forgiveness, he longs to pour that forgiveness out on us. He's not like the judge from last week that only does what is right begrudgingly. He is the prodigal father, longing for us to turn to him so that he can celebrate our return to him.

And once we have returned to him and received his forgiveness, we are perfect in his eyes; at least until the next time we sin.

So in conclusion, God is expecting perfection from us, but we mustn't let that drive us to despair. God has provided a method for us to become perfect in his eyes. The death of Jesus provides the way in which God can count us perfect, but it is not something that can be taken for granted. It is freely given to those that ask for it recognising their own imperfection, but it is withheld from those that do not see their need of it and so do not ask.

Any Questions?

(Several members of the congregation then asked questions regarding the message of the sermon).