

## “Which one am I?” Luke 18:9-14 Deus in Loco 2025

I was reading and listening in the Gospel of Luke the other week and a parable of Jesus smacked me right in the heart. I am going to share the parable with you today and see if it smacks you as well. The passage comes right after a parable that Jesus teaches that is very hard to understand (Luke 18:1-8) and often needs some digging to fully understand. The parable we are going to focus on today is not hard to understand at all, but we often don't think it applies to us. The parable that Jesus tells needs absolutely no explanation, but does need honest application in each of our lives. We will be in Luke 18 today. We will focus on the second parable Jesus teaches in this chapter.

This parable occurs in the middle of several other parables, significant teaching, and memorable events. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem to die. Luke 16-19 all lead up to Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, which we call the Triumphal Entry, in Luke 19. Think of this as happening two weeks before Jesus dies on the cross. In the middle of all of that teaching and travel and interaction we have Luke 18:9-14. Jesus tells a parable where we do not have to pray or dig for the meaning, but rather the beginning of the passage tells us right away what the meaning of the parable is about. Let's read Luke 18:9-14.

Luke 18:9 (ESV) “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” Honestly, we must stop right there. This parable will need very little explanation, but as I said, it will need honest application in our lives. Depending on how self-aware we are emotionally or spiritually, we may not see that Jesus is speaking directly to us.

The parable was directed: “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” That word “righteous” probably describes those who ritually kept the Law of God from the Old Testament. Jesus is talking to those who thought they were morally superior to others around them. There is a reason, in a

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moment, one of the people in the parable is a Pharisee. Pharisees were known for being super religious and very observant of all of God’s commands. The parable was directed to those who not only considered themselves better than others, but: “treated others with contempt,” which means to “utterly give no account” about someone. It is a pretty intense word. There is a reason, in a moment, that the other person in the parable is a tax collector. In Jesus’ day, tax collectors were considered traitors and thieves because of how Rome set up the tax system and had local people draining their neighbors’ pockets.

There are other examples of this same attitude in the teachings of Jesus and even in the life of Jesus that He experienced. I think about Jesus’ parable earlier in Luke (chapter 15) which we title the ‘Parable of the Prodigal Son.’ In that parable, the older brother felt morally superior to his younger brother who had sinned... and yet we see that the older brother was living in just as much error as his brother. I think about the religious leaders, like those in Matthew 23, that claimed moral and spiritual authority over Jesus and others and yet looked down on those they defined as sinners and even plotted to kill Jesus.

Luke 18:10-14 (ESV) “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

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As I think about this parable, my mind goes to all the ways in which this passage can be applied in our lives. My life. Your life. I think about... how surrendered humility is essential before God because pride separates us from God. The tax collector had a humble posture and heart before the Lord which showed that he honored God as best he could. The words of his prayer showed a humble heart. Surrendered. Contrite. The Pharisee had pride-filled posture and heart before the Lord because he had his life together; felt good about following the religious rules. The words of his prayer weren't necessarily focused on God, but on others around him. Arrogant. Holier than thou. Prideful. Which one am I? Which one are you?

I think about... how justification before God comes only by God's mercy, not our merit. The word justification means that we have sinned, but God judges us not guilty. My justification came at the cost of the innocent life of Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, I sinned. Yes, I still sin. Yes, I will sin in the future. No, God does not hold my sin against me, but not because Jesus magically made my sin disappear “as if I never did it.” I still did it. No, God does not hold my sin against me because His Son suffered and died paying for my willful arrogant self. The Pharisee thought he had good standing before God because he followed the rules. The tax collector was justified because he sought God's mercy, not because he earned it through good deeds. Nobody's good deeds get them right with God. Which one am I? Which one are you?

As I reflect on the parable, I think about... how self-righteousness is spiritually dangerous. This is the part that really grinds on me revealing my true heart. The thing about self-righteousness is that it is a sneaky ugly worm that often goes unnoticed until it does much damage to us and to those around us. It is a shadow that likes to lurk in the background. Listen, thinking we are morally

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superior to others distances us from grace and leads to spiritual blindness. Here is how self-righteousness is so sneaky... are you ready? I'm not and I know what I am about to say! When I read the parable of Jesus in Luke 18:9-14, we are given two people: the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Here it comes... the moment I think to myself... “I am so glad I am not like the Pharisee” ... I immediately become him. I thought I was doing a good thing by not being like the Pharisee.

I. Am. Him. I act just like him towards poor people. I act just like him towards people who live differently than me. I act just like him towards folks who struggle with same sex attraction. I act just like him towards someone whose sin gets revealed. I act just like him when my sin stays hidden cause I am good at hiding things. I act just like him with someone who votes differently than me. The moment you are grateful you are not like the Pharisee you become him. I hate that. Because I know he's the bad example in the parable. The reason I have a distaste for being the Pharisee is because comparison with others is spiritually unhelpful even though I think I am doing a good thing. The Pharisee judged himself as righteous by comparing himself to others, especially the tax collector. Here is the truth: Other people are not the standard of righteousness. God's standard is the measure of righteousness.

My final thought as I looked through this parable was for some answers. The opposite to spiritual self-righteousness is spiritual self-awareness. What does spiritual self-awareness look like? How do I develop that in myself as I cultivate my relationship with Christ? To be spiritually aware as a believer in Jesus means to live with a conscious sensitivity to God's presence, guidance, and truth in our daily lives with the Bible as the God-given standard. What would that have looked like for the Pharisee? What would that have looked like for the tax collector? What does that look like for us?

First, I think spiritual self-awareness involves listening for the Holy Spirit amongst all the other voices and noises that assault us every day. As I reflect on Jesus’ words about children, I note that children must listen. Our world fills our hearts and minds with useless noise and messages that draw us away from God. Satan wants us confused, spiritually tired, and unable to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Our heart’s desire should be to listen to our Heavenly Father and not listen to those influences that would draw us away from Him. Spiritual awareness includes being sensitive to the promptings and convictions of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual growth or repentance or joy comes from the Holy Spirit. None of that requires looking down on someone else.

Second, I think spiritual self-awareness involves understanding Scripture deeply. As I reflect on Jesus words about children, I note that children are constantly learning lessons of all kinds. A spiritually aware person does not just read the Bible, but studies the Bible individually and takes opportunities to study with other believers. Spiritually aware Christians don’t just read the Bible, but they absorb it and more importantly apply it. Reading the Bible with questions, prayer, and reflection is an important part of seeing ourselves clearly and seeing God clearly. None of that requires judging ourselves better than others.

When we confess: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” God responds with grace and the offer of covering by the blood of Jesus Christ. If you think you are doing well on your own, then start with thinking about those words: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” May The Lord always be willing to cover our innumerable sins with the blood of His righteous Son. Amen!