

Bible Study Guide

PASTORATE

October 30, 2013

Lectionary Readings

Psalm 84; Jeremiah 14:1–10, 19–22; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18; **Luke 18:9–14**

Context

Ever since Luke 9:51, Jesus has “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Luke’s narrative is building toward that key moment with Jesus’ triumphal entry in 19:28–40. As things have gotten closer, Jesus has expanded upon the true nature of the kingdom of God (17:20–18:8). Our passage here marks the beginning of a new section—the one right before Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem (18:9–19:27). These stories and encounters describe those who are fit to enter this kingdom. Two groups of people clearly come to the surface: those who act faithfully toward God and others, and those who act selfishly and proud. The following parable starkly highlights this contrast.

Luke 18:9–14

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Commentary

The point of this parable is not to condemn a particular social group, but rather to warn against a particular disposition toward God. It should go without saying that not all Pharisees fit the parable’s description, and neither did all tax collectors. In fact, Pharisees were admired for their commitment to follow God’s law. Indeed, the practices of prayer, fasting and tithing done by the Pharisee in the parable are admirable as much then as they are now. And the Pharisee even went above and beyond what was expected, fasting twice a week rather than only on feast days, and tithing on everything he had rather than only on the things he produced directly.

The primary characteristic, though, that keeps the Pharisee from being justified was his disposition toward God. He was self-possessed and self-dependent, as if he was a gift to God rather than the other way around. His supposed “prayer of thanks” doesn’t even mention a divine action on his behalf. Furthermore, the Pharisee claims superior status by comparing himself with others, and he lumps all others who are not like him into one “evil” category. The tax collector is automatically deemed a thief.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is commended for his reverse disposition toward God. Though there is nothing in the text that suggests he had done anything specifically wrong requiring repentance, he humbly recognizes his own unworthiness before God. He needs God and pleads for his mercy. As opposed to the Pharisee, he makes no claims to status at all, but acknowledges his position as a sinner who can take refuge only in the grace of God. The parable then teaches that it is one with such a humble attitude toward God and others who is fit for God's kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things that stand out to you in this passage?
2. What are some ways that "good Christian people" today exalt themselves over others?
3. Where's the line between practicing the spiritual disciplines with a humble disposition toward God versus a proud one?
4. We as Christians are supposed to live their lives in such a way that they are markedly different from the world, and yet at the same time, we are not to live in a way that condemns the world, as if we were better. How do we do that?
5. What do you think about cultivating a disposition toward God that recognizes your unworthiness? What do you think this is supposed to look like? What do you think this is not supposed to look like?
6. How can the labels we use for others presumptuously judge them? How can we guard against that?
7. How does this passage encourage you and your faith?

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*