

Title: A Tale of Two Prayers
Date: March 8, 2026
Scripture: Luke 18:9-14
Speaker: Jeremiah Nichols

Main Idea

The sinner who humbles himself and cries out for mercy goes home justified, while the self-righteous person who trusts in his own performance remains far from God.

Sermon in Brief

In Luke 18:9–14, two men go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other sinners and points to his own religious performance. The tax collector stands far off, will not even lift his eyes to heaven, beats his breast, and prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus declares that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, goes home justified. Which reminds us that justification is not earned by performance, comparison, or religious achievement, but received by faith in the mercy of God through Christ.

Main Points:

1. Two Audiences: the Jewish leaders of the past and the church of the present.
2. Two Men: The Pharisee & the tax collector. Known characters but unexpected outcomes.
3. Two Prayers: Pharisee's reveals trust in performance and comparison while the tax collector's reveals humble dependence on mercy.
4. Two Destinies: The tax collector leaves justified, the Pharisee does not.
5. Two Declarations: Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Key Truths:

- Real righteousness does not produce contempt.
- Self-righteousness is not always obvious to us.
- The gospel humbles both new and longtime believers.
- At the cross, no one stands higher than anyone else.

Key Quotes

“Pride and spite are not fruits of the righteous Holy Spirit.”

“If we read this story looking down on the Pharisee, we are pulling a Pharisee.”

“A short prayer is enough. Seven words will do.”

“Christian, at the cross, nobody stands higher than anyone else.”

“You can’t look down on anybody when your eyes are in the dirt.”

Reflect & Respond

When you look in the spiritual mirror, do you see someone needy for mercy or someone confident in performance?

Are you more likely to confess your own sin or compare yourself to someone else’s failure?

Where has contempt crept into your heart toward another person or group of people?

What spiritual achievements or disciplines are you tempted to treat as your grounds of confidence?

Who do you need to stop looking down on and start praying for?

This Week...

This Week pray the tax collector’s prayer slowly and honestly:

“God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Then ask God to show you one place where self-righteousness, comparison, or contempt has taken root in your heart. Confess it, turn from it, and rest again in the righteousness of Christ alone.

Prayer Prompt:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Deliver me from trusting in my own righteousness. Keep me from contempt toward others. Teach me to rest in Your mercy, rejoice in Your grace, and stand only in the righteousness of Christ. Amen