

Luke 18:9-14

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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Last week, Jesus told us a parable to show our "need to pray always and never lose heart," Luke 18:1 (the parable of the widow who persisted in seeking justice. Click [here](#) to read my comments on that passage.)

And now, Jesus tells us a parable to show our need to avoid pride, hubris, smugness, self-righteousness, etc. should we happen, in fact, to actually "pray always."

I suppose a good place to begin avoiding smugness ourselves is to **NOT** thank God that I/we are not like the Pharisee in the parable. Pharisees were one group of religious leaders who were concerned about reform of daily living to conform with the teachings of the Bible. In itself, this is a worthy sounding project. But then, as now, such projects lead to strong divisions between those who are in - those who are living in conformity with the teachings of the Bible, and those who are out. Thus the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is NOT about the desire to reform daily living to conform to the teachings of the Bible. They both have a similar desire, but they are drawing different lines about who is in and who is out, and about exactly what is the nature of the reform that is needed.

The normal posture for prayer is standing with eyes cast down. The Pharisee and the tax collector stand apart because any contact between them would make the Pharisee ritually unclean according to the teachings of the Bible; he would have to go home and change before being able to pray.

The tithing and fasting of the Pharisee are above the requirements of the teachings of the Bible - he is indeed behaving in an exemplary fashion. Note also that the Pharisee offers a prayer of thanks - it would be wrong to hear this as a prayer of a "self-made man." In other contexts, haven't many of us given thanks that "there, but for the grace of God, go I?" The parable doesn't permit this gloss, but as I said at the outset, let's avoid being proud that **we** are not like that Pharisee standing there.

Not only does collecting taxes make one very unpopular, it also makes one unable to live according to the teachings of the Bible because one must constantly be in contact with ritually unclean people and goods. And taxes paid for the Roman armies and elites that were occupying the Holy Land. So it is surprising that a tax collector is the hero of the story. Bruce Malina says that likely the tax collector in this parable is probably a poor daily labourer, and in any case would be a sympathetic figure to Jesus' followers. Beating the chest is a female gesture and would only be used by a man in extreme anguish.

However, the parable is actually offered as a cautionary tale to those who have much to be thankful for. (As is the story of Job.) Here's the age old human frailty: We believe that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. I have much to be thankful for, therefore it must be that God has rewarded me, therefore I must be righteous, therefore I am not a sinner. And especially: I am not a sinner like that drinker, that gambler, that druggie, that street person, that Wall Street tycoon, etc., etc.

The pitfall in having much to be thankful for is to forget to see ourselves - and others - as God sees us: as beloved children who are foolish, frail and faulty, and therefore in constant need of forgiveness, grace, healing, reconciliation, correction and restoration. Even, and perhaps most especially, those who have much to be thankful for.

What "justifies" the tax collector is not remorse or guilt - he is **NOT** confessing specific sins. What justifies him is his deep recognition of his need for God's grace and forgiveness - his realization of his deep need of God.

Personal aside: It is my conviction that God does **NOT** grant grace and forgiveness only after we confess our sin. That is, my confession is not a condition that must be met before God will grant me forgiveness and grace. Quite the opposite. In every moment, God is offering grace and forgiveness, and it precisely this unconditional generosity that evokes and supports the self-awareness of my need for God. The bumper sticker we all should have on our cars is: "God is always loving and forgiving, therefore stop being a jerk and start living this love." This is the transformation the tax collector experiences in this parable.