

**PART 1** Aren't we all glad that we are not like the Pharisee? The snooty arrogance of the Pharisee, and his overblown confidence in the purity of his own religious practices easily inspire all manner of delighted comparisons. What fun it would be to identify and lampoon various individuals or groups on our religious landscape who seem to share his glaring faults. There are so many holier-than-thou types of all different stripes. There are fundamentalist types trumpeting their faithfulness to the Bible and crusading against every moral failing. And there are smug, supercilious liberals who are oh-so-sure of the intellectual superiority of their enlightened theologies. And it is such fun to point the finger and laugh over the comparisons between our chosen targets and the bad guy in this story. But if we do that, the joke is on us, and it's not very funny. You see, any reading of this that sets about identifying someone else as being as bad as the Pharisee, and thereby identifying ourselves rather comfortingly with the repentant tax-collector who went home vindicated by God, is in fact falling into the exact same error that is being exposed in the Pharisee.

The important characteristic of the repentant tax-collector in this story is that he doesn't retaliate in kind. Most of us would have been unable to resist the temptation to retaliate. Hearing the Pharisee loudly praying "Thank you God that I am not like that miserable scumbag over there", as he looked contemptuously down his nose at me, I'd have been raising my voice so everyone could hear me pray, 'Thank you God that you have spared me from becoming an arrogant, holier-than-thou prat like that' And the moment I retaliate like that, I have made myself the equal of that Pharisee, and far from being the equal of the one who went home vindicated.

One of the things that helps explain what is going on in this reading is to note that the reading it follows on immediately from. It was the story Jesus told about the poor widow who kept pestering the judge, asking for him to vindicate her against her opponent in some legal dispute. And the judge, although corrupt and without caring a hoot about the widow's situation, eventually deals with the case just to get rid of her. So part of what Jesus is pointing to, when he follows up with this story of the arrogant Pharisee and the repentant tax-collector, is a similarity in their quests. The poor widow wants to be vindicated, and the tax-collector, we are told, does go home vindicated. But the problem that is thus realised is our tendency to always think of vindication as competitive. We want some judge to find for us and against them. It is always one against the other. And so that's exactly what we see going on in the Pharisee's prayer. He sees himself as standing before God who he imagines as a judge who will vindicate one and reject the claims of the other, and having so imagined God, he stands proud and confident that he has the case well and truly won.

For the Pharisee, and indeed for many of us, the purpose of the religious law was to give clear guidance to enable us to see whether or not we were making the grade, and but we use also to see whether or not others were making the grade. "If I can get a handle on what is required, as spelled out in the law, and do a good job of staying on the right side of it, then all is well with me. I've got nothing to worry about." Just as it does in the law courts, the law thus becomes a way of dividing us up into winners and losers, the vindicated and the condemned. Such an understanding of the law unmasks a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is and what God is like. We are seeing the judgement of God as being essentially competitive. We think that God only wants to accept the best and that entry into the love of God is on a points scored basis. Places are limited and God is only going to accept the best, the ones who measure up and score better than others. I know of one religious sect who, on the basis of a verse in the book of Revelation, believes that God is only going to accept ten thousand people into heaven, and if you believe that, then the quest is not to be the best you can be, but to be in the best ten thousand.

the Pharisee is an absolute reflection of the God he believes in. So he looks around, and rejoices to see that very few others can match his level of compliance to the law because that assures him that his points score will be more than adequate to assure his acceptance into the love of God. He is quite sure that God is just like him, dividing us up and looking approvingly on a few winners while despising the losers and rejects. And as ugly as it sounds when I put it like that, most of us are still caught up in that understanding to some extent.

We vary in what it is that we imagine that God is measuring about us, but most of us think that we ultimately have to qualify, make the grade, get an entry score. Some of us think that God is measuring our Sabbath-keeping and our church attendance, and others think that God is measuring our parenting skills and our physical fitness and our patriotism, and others think that God is measuring our recycling and sustainable energy use and checking our shopping trolleys for organic fair-trade produce. And while most of us wouldn't stand up in public like this Pharisee and congratulate ourselves for proving ourselves more worthy of God's acceptance than everyone else, we nevertheless look around us and readily note to ourselves how poorly others are doing in living up to our standards.

Thus, "the law", whichever version of it we have subscribed to, has been turned into a tool of exclusion and oppression. It divides us up, and condemns some as victims while vindicating and rewarding a precious few. Which, as Jesus showed us and the Apostle Paul spoke about repeatedly, is a far cry from what the law was intended to do. The point of the law was not to provide us a means to divide ourselves up as better and worse, but to show us that we are all pretty much in the same boat and all utterly dependent on the grace of God. The purpose was to show us that our hope of being accepted into the love and life of God is if, having shown us that we are all in the same boat, God says, "Guess what? I'll take the whole shipload of you! You're all in!"

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PART 2 And that is precisely what Jesus came to make known to us about God. He lived and died trying to get us to see that although God cares intensely about what's good for us and how we treat each other, God is not the least bit interested in who is the best. And God certainly doesn't wish to spend eternity surrounded by none but the upper echelon of anally retentive law-keepers! God wants absolutely everybody. No matter who you are or what you've done or what you are yet to do, God longs to welcome you in and seat you in honour at the banqueting table of God's love and life. God is not the least bit interested in measuring your worth and testing you to see whether you deserve it.

But, you might be thinking, doesn't Jesus say that one man went home justified rather than the other? Doesn't that mean that somehow the repentant tax-collector made the grade and the arrogant Pharisee didn't, and it is still a competitive entry system but the Pharisee misread the conditions. The answer is no. The tax-collector in this story doesn't do anything to qualify for God's love and acceptance. It's not a humility competition either.

The only reason the tax-collector in this story goes home justified is that he puts his trust entirely in God's mercy. And so he despises no one and makes no attempt to prove that his humility should trump someone else's piety. He simply puts himself at the mercy of God and accepts whatever God gives him, which turns out to be love and grace and freedom and life, and if you want a score, here's a hundred percent for free. And the reason that the Pharisee ends up cut off from God is not because God has rejected him, but because he has rejected any God who would accept the tax-collector. Those who demand the right to prove themselves worthy always end up despising those around them who have proved themselves unworthy, and they insist on special recognition and special treatment, and are scandalised by any suggestion that they might enter alongside everyone else as though they were the equals of everyone else. And thus scandalised, they refuse the offer point blank. Jesus shakes his head sadly and says, "I'm sorry, but there is only one door. I'd love you to come in, but you've got to come in with this lot because I'm not turning them away. We're not going to introduce a competitive entry system.

Does that mean that God doesn't care and we don't care how anyone lives or behaves or treats one another? No. God cares and we care because we want the best for everyone. But it is when we know ourselves accepted and beloved that we are freed to live up to the righteousness that is given to us as a gift. We are already loved and accepted by God and nothing can ever take that away, and therefore we have nothing to fear and we are liberated to live with freedom and flair and to freely and recklessly express all the love and grace that we have been so freely given. . Thanks be to God!