

Chapter 9

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

(Luke 18:9–14)

The Text:

And he said to certain people who considered themselves righteous and despised others, this parable. (INTRODUCTION)

1	“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector.	TWO GO UP PHARISEE, TAX COLLECTOR
2	The Pharisee stood by himself thus praying, ‘God, I thank thee because I am not like other men,	HIS MANNER HIS PRAYER
3	extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector.	TAX COLLECTOR (THE IMAGE)
4	I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I possess.’	HIS SELF- RIGHTEOUSNESS
5	But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven,	TAX COLLECTOR (THE REALITY)
6	but he beat upon his chest saying, ‘God! Make an atonement for me, a sinner.’	HIS MANNER HIS PRAYER
7	I tell you, he went down to his house made righteous, rather than that one.”	TWO GO DOWN TAX COLLECTOR, PHARISEE

For every one who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (CONCLUSION)

This famous parable has long been considered a simple story about pride, humility, and the proper attitude for prayer. These themes are certainly present. Yet, as in the case of many of the parables we have examined, a closer look uncovers a weighty theological presentation that is traditionally overlooked. Here

also a key word can be translated in a fashion significantly different from the translation tradition common among us. Again a closer look at culture and style unlocks otherwise obscured theological content. The parabolic ballad form noted in many of the previous parables is also evidenced here. In this case the stanzas are inverted in their relationship to one another. This parabolic ballad form will be examined first, then the cultural and religious background of the parable. Our interpretation will attempt to keep these factors in focus. First, then, is an examination of the literary form set forth above.

A series of parallel themes marks out this parable as another of the seven-stanza parabolic ballads (cf. Luke 10:30–35; 14:16–23; 16:1–8). After the introduction (which is supplied by Luke or his source), the parable opens with two men going up to the temple (1). The parable concludes with the same two men going down, but now their order is reversed. The tax collector is now mentioned first (7). Stanzas 2 and 6 clearly form a pair also. The exterior manner of each man is listed first (in each case), then his direct address to God. The second line in each stanza is an explanation of each worshiper's self-understanding. Stanzas 3 and 5 concentrate on the tax collector. He is specifically named in each. Yet there is a sharp contrast between the two pictures. Stanza 3 is the tax collector as seen through the eyes of the Pharisee, while stanza 5 is the reality of the man as portrayed by the storyteller. The center in stanza 4 is a presentation of the Pharisee's case for his self-righteousness. This theme of righteousness is then repeated at the end of the seven stanzas (a feature common to this literary form). Another literary device common to this form of inverted parallelism is the point of turning which occurs just past the center of the structure (cf. Bailey, *Poet*, 48, 51, 53, 62). This feature appears here in stanza 5 where the story turns around with the startling phrase, "But the tax collector..." Only one parallelism is not in precise balance. We are told how each of the participants was standing. But the first appears in stanza 2 and the second in 5. It is possible to see the movement of the parable in a simplified manner that would bring these two ideas in balance. This would be as follows:

Two went up
 The Pharisee stood
 and prayed
 The tax collector stood
 and prayed

Two went down

The difficulty with this structure is that the prayer of the Pharisee is five lines while the tax collector's prayer is only one. Also, the ground for the Pharisee's self-righteousness (stanza 4) loses its prominence in the center. Other close parallelisms in the ballad are blurred when this element of how they stand is brought into juxtaposition. Thus we prefer to see the first structure suggested above as that intended by the author. This parable, like that of the Good Samaritan, is seen as deliberately structured with seven stanzas that invert with a climax in the center. The introduction has been added by the editor, and the structure would reinforce the opinion that the conclusion may also be exterior to the parable, which ends with stanza 7. Each double line will need to be examined in turn.

INTRODUCTION

And he said to certain people who considered themselves righteous and despised others, this parable.

This introduction is clearly added by the evangelist or his source. As such it is an interpretation of the parable. The interpreter tells the reader that the subject is *righteousness* and, in particular, self-righteousness. T. W. Manson comments that the parable is addressed to those who

had the kind of faith in themselves and their own powers that weaker vessels are content to have in God, and that the ground of this confidence was their own achievements in piety and morality (*Sayings*, 309).

Centuries earlier Ibn al-Ṭayyib came to the same conclusion. In his comment on this verse he remarks, "Christ saw that some of those who gathered around him relied on their own righteousness for their salvation rather than on the mercy of God" (Ibn al-Ṭayyib, Manqariyūs edition, II, 313). As we have observed, the question of humility in prayer is indeed dealt with. Yet the theme of righteousness and how it is achieved is pointed up by verse 9 as a central thrust of the parable.

We have argued elsewhere that the material in the Lucan central section was compiled by a pre-Lucan editor (Bailey, *Poet*, 79–85). That editor/theologian placed this parable into his outline along with other material on the subject of prayer. Thus *he* identified it as a parable about prayer, and indeed it is. It is not too likely

that this editor/theologian, having placed the parable in a collection of material on prayer, then wrote an introduction that highlighted a different aspect of the theology of the parable. Therefore this interpretative introduction is either traceable to a very early Christian commentator who wrote prior to the compilation of the Travel Narrative or to Luke himself. Yet whether this introduction is traceable to a very early evangelist, the editor of the Travel Narrative, or to Luke, it must be taken seriously. As we will observe, the parable is virtually studded with vocabulary pointing to the topic of righteousness and how it is achieved. Thus this introduction is clearly appropriate to the internal message of the parable. This brings us to the parable itself.

1 “Two men went up into the temple to pray,
one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector.”

TWO GO UP
PHARISEE, TAX COLLECTOR

The Pharisee is mentioned first, then the tax collector. They both *go up*. But when it comes time to *go down*, the tax collector will be in the lead.

We have traditionally assumed that the setting of the parable is that of private devotions. This assumption has deeply colored the way we in the Western tradition have translated and interpreted the text. Middle Easterners read the same text and assume a parable about public worship. Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s remark is typical where he comments on the publican standing “afar off” and says, “that is, apart from the Pharisee and *from the rest of the worshipers in the temple*” (Ibn al-Ṭayyib, Manqariyūs edition, II, 315; emphasis mine). Here Ibn al-Ṭayyib affirms the presence of a worshipping congregation almost in passing. This assumption has a basis in the text, as we will see.

A part of our problem in the West is that the English verb “pray” is almost exclusively applied to private devotions, and the verb “worship” is used for corporate worship. However, in biblical literature, the verb “pray” can mean either. In Luke 1:10 Zechariah is participating in the daily atonement sacrifice in the temple and takes his turn at burning the incense in the Holy Place. In the meantime, “The whole multitude of the people were praying outside...” Jesus quotes from Isaiah 56:7 where the temple is called “a house of prayer” (Luke 19:46). The famous listing of early Christian concerns in Acts 2:42 includes the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and *the prayers*. In this list the word “prayers” is a synonym for community worship. Acts 16:13, 16 speak of a place of public worship as “a place of prayer.” These and many other texts make clear that

the context of a given passage must determine whether the verb “pray” means corporate worship or private devotions. When Jesus goes up on a mountain alone to pray, obviously the context is private devotions. But in this parable there is a series of clear indicators that we are here dealing with corporate worship, not private devotions. First, specifically, *two* people go up to a place of public worship at the same time. Second, they go down at the same time (presumably after the service is over). Third, the temple (a place of public worship) is specifically mentioned. The contemporary Middle Easterner has the same double meaning attached to the verb “pray.” But when he, as a Christian, says, “I am going to *church* to pray,” or, as a Muslim, remarks, “I am on my way to the *mosque* to pray,” everyone knows that they mean corporate worship, not private devotions. Even so with the parable, the mention of the temple adds considerable weight to the assumption that corporate worship is intended. Fourth, as we will note below, the text tells us that the Pharisee “stood by himself.” The obvious assumption is that he stood apart from the other worshipers. Fifth, we also are told that the tax collector “stood afar off.” Afar off from whom? It can mean afar off from the Pharisee, but can also mean afar off from the rest of the worshipers. This is especially the case if it can be substantiated that there *are* worshipers present, apart from whom the Pharisee has also chosen to stand. Finally, the tax collector specifically mentions the *atonement* in his prayer. The temple ritual provided for a morning and evening atoning sacrifice to be offered each day and a congregation was normally present. Indeed, it is always assumed in the discussions of the service (cf. Mishna *Tam id*, Danby, 582–89; Sir. 50:1–21). In summary, the verb “pray” gives us two interpretive options. It can mean private devotions or corporate worship. The weight of evidence in the parable suggests the latter. It is with this assumption that we will proceed through the parable. Yet one can ask, does not each man in the parable offer a private prayer?

Quite likely the traditional assumption that the parable is talking only about private devotions is related to the fact that each of the principal figures in the parable offers a private prayer. Does this not lead the reader to conclude that no service of public worship is involved? Not so. Safrai describes the worship of the temple in the first century.

Many Jews would go up daily to the Temple in order to be present at the worship, to receive the priestly benediction bestowed upon the people at the end, (and) *to pray during the burning of the incense* (Safrai, *JPFC*, II, 877; emphasis mine).

He also states that they are there to “worship and pray during the liturgy” (*ibid.*, 876). Ben Sirach has an elaborate description of the atonement ritual in the temple (Sir. 50:1–21). He mentions hymns of praise sung by the cantors

as the people pleaded with the Lord Most High,
and prayed in the presence of the Merciful,
until the service of the Lord was completed
and the ceremony at an end (Sir. 50:19).

Clearly, the people are praying *during* the service. The time of the offering of the incense was the often mentioned time of personal prayer (as in Luke 1:10 noted above). Safrai writes, “During the incense-offering, the people gathered for prayer in the court” (Safrai, *JPFC*, II, 888). This was so commonly accepted as the right time for private prayers that people not in the temple were known to offer their own special petitions at that time, particularly during the afternoon sacrifice (cf. Jth. 9:1). Thus there is conclusive evidence that private prayers are offered as a part of the corporate worship during the atonement sacrifice ritual held twice daily.

If then the two men are on their way to participate in corporate worship, can we be sure that the service was the morning or evening atonement sacrifice? Indeed yes, since this was the only *daily* service of public worship in the temple. Thus anyone on any unspecified day on his way to corporate prayers in the temple would naturally be assumed to be on his way to the atonement sacrifice. This service was the sacrifice of a lamb (for the sins of the people) at dawn. A second similar sacrifice was held at three in the afternoon. The elaborate rituals connected with these sacrifices have been fully described (Dalman, *Sacred*, 302f.; Edersheim, *Temple*, 152–173; Safrai, *JPFC*, II, 887–890). The time of incense was especially appropriate as a time of personal prayer because by this time in the service the sacrifice of the lamb had covered the sins of Israel and thus the way to God was open. The faithful could *now* approach Him (Edersheim, *Temple*, 157). The incense arose before God’s face and the faithful offered their separate petitions to Him. This background appropriately combines for us the idea of private prayers (which the two actors in this drama do indeed offer) in the context of corporate worship (in that the atonement sacrifice is mentioned in the parable) in a place of public worship like the temple (which is specified as the scene of the action).

If, however, one concludes that the evidence for corporate worship is yet unconvincing as a specific setting for the parable, we are still obliged to assume this

same background in general. At dawn each day the atonement sacrifice took place. The smoke from the sacrifice arose over the altar and the temple area. Any believer offering private prayers in the temple any time between the two services stood in the presence of this altar with its burning sacrifice. He knew that it was possible for him to address God with his private needs *only* because the atonement sacrifice had taken place. Any private prayers were, as it were, sandwiched in between the two daily atonement sacrifices. Thus any kind of prayer in the temple area (private devotions or prayer in connection with corporate worship) necessarily presupposes the context of the twice daily atonement sacrifice that is specifically mentioned in the parable itself.

First-century attitudes toward Pharisees and tax collectors are sufficiently well-known as to need no explanation. The one is the precise observer of the law, and the other is a breaker of the law and a traitor to the nation. With the actors on stage, the play proceeds.

2	“The Pharisee stood by himself thus praying, ‘God, I thank thee because I am not like other men,’ “	HIS MANNER HIS PRAYER
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The first line of this couplet has within it both a textual and a translational problem. We have opted for the text selected by Kurt Aland *et al.* in the United Bible Societies Text (Jeremias accepts the same reading and identifies it as a Semitic style of speech; *Parables*, 140). The deeper problem (which has most likely created the textual variants) is the question, did he *stand by himself* or *pray to himself*? The phrase *pros heauton* can be read “by himself” and attached to the previous word “stood,” which gives us the above translation. Or it can be read “to himself” and attached to the word “praying” which follows. In this latter case it then reads, “The Pharisee stood praying thus to himself.” It has been argued for some time that the prepositional phrase *pros heauton* must refer to his manner of praying because to modify the verb *standing* it should read *kath heauton* in accord with the classical Greek usage (Plummer, 416).

However, a number of things can be said against Plummer. First, in the Lucan parables a soliloquy is introduced with the phrase *en heautō*, not *pros heauton* (cf. 7:39; 12:17; 16:3; 18:4). Second, we are told how the tax collector stood in relation to others and it is only natural to have a similar description of the Pharisee. Third, the traditional understanding of the text may be an additional example of the spilling phenomenon. This phenomenon occurs where texts have been read

together for so long that, like two rivers flowing together, one text “spills” into the next. That is, meaning is carried over inadvertently from one text to another. An important example of this phenomenon can be seen in Luke 11:5–13, where the idea of persistence has spilled from verses 9–13 back into the parable in verses 5–8 (cf. Bailey, *Poet*, 128f) So here, in the previous parable the judge talks *to himself* (*en heautō*); thus perhaps inadvertently the Pharisee has gradually been seen as also offering a soliloquy. Fourth, Codex Bezae (D), along with a few other minor manuscripts, has *kath heauton*, which indicates that its editors clearly understood the Pharisee to be standing alone, not praying alone. Fifth, the very important Old Syriac from the second century translates this text in an unambiguous fashion and has the Pharisee *standing by himself*. Delitzsch, in his famous Hebrew version of the New Testament, also translates the phrase “standing by himself,” as do a number of our Arabic versions. Sixth, when we read the text as a soliloquy this detail adds nothing to the parable. But when the Pharisee is seen as standing apart from the other worshipers, the detail is in precise harmony with everything else that is said and done in the parable and adds considerably to the entire dramatic effect (with Manson, *Sayings*, 310). Seventh, classical Greek usage can hardly be determinative in the Lucan Travel Narrative with its many parables and Semitisms and obvious translation Greek. Thus, with these considerations in mind, we prefer to see the Pharisee standing apart from the remainder of the worshipers about him.

The Pharisee’s reasons for standing apart can be easily understood. He considers himself righteous and indeed “despises others,” as we see from his description of them. Those who kept the law in a strict fashion were known as “associates” (*haberim*). Those who did not were called “people of the land” (*am-haaretz*). These latter Danby defines as

those Jews who were ignorant of the Law and who failed to observe the rules of cleanness and uncleanness and were not scrupulous in setting apart Tithes from the produce (namely, Heave-Offering, First Tithe, Second Tithe, and Poorman’s Tithe) (Danby, 793).

In our parable, paying the tithe is specifically mentioned. In the eyes of a strict Pharisee the most obvious candidate for the classification of *am-haaretz* would be a tax collector. Furthermore, there was a particular type of uncleanness that was contracted by sitting, riding, or *even leaning against* something unclean (*ibid.*,

795). This uncleanness was called *midras*-uncleanness. The Mishna specifically states, “For Pharisees the clothes of an *am-haaretz* count as suffering *midras*-uncleanness” (Mishna *Hagigah* 2:7, Danby, 214). With this background in mind it is little wonder that the Pharisee wanted to stand aside from the rest of the worshipers. If he accidentally brushes against the tax collector (or any other *am-haaretz* who might be among the worshipers), he would sustain *midras*-uncleanness. His state of cleanliness is too important. It must not be compromised for any reason. Physical isolation, from his point of view, would be a statement and an important one at that. Thus the Pharisee carefully stands aloof from the others gathered around the altar.

Furthermore, the problem of the proud man standing aloof in worship was a contemporary problem. One of the intertestamental books called *The Assumption of Moses* gives us an illuminating illustration. This book, written most likely during the lifetime of Jesus (Charles, II, 411), has some very sharp things to say about the leadership of the nation during the time of the unknown author. These “impious rulers” are described as follows:

And though their hands and their minds touch unclean things, yet their mouth shall speak great things, and they shall say furthermore: “Do not touch me lest thou shouldst pollute me in the place (where I stand) ...” (7:9–10, Charles, II, 420).

This remarkable text has striking parallels with our parable. In each case the leaders are under attack. In each they “speak great things.” The Pharisee in the parable goes down to his house not justified in God’s sight, and here the impious rulers are described as defiled with unclean things. Improper attitudes are criticized in each account. We know from John 11:48 that “the place” can mean the temple area, and it is possible that the above text carries this same meaning and is therefore also set in the temple. Thus Jesus’ criticism is in harmony with others of his time. Finally, and most important for our discussion, each talks of someone who wants to stand in physical isolation from the others.

Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisee is also in harmony with advice offered earlier by the great Hillel, who said, “Keep not aloof from the congregation and trust not in thyself until the day of thy death, and judge not thy fellow until thou art thyself come to his place” (Mishna *Pirke Aboth* 2:5, Danby, 448). Hillel’s remark is further evidence that some religious leaders had a tendency to “keep aloof from the congregation.”

In summary, the Pharisee in the parable goes up to attend the morning or afternoon atonement sacrifice. In a gesture of religious superiority he stands apart from the other worshipers.

When the problematic phrase *pros heauton* is attached to his mode of standing, it is then possible to understand his prayer as offered out loud. The Sinaiticus original, along with some important early Latin and Coptic versions, leaves out the “to/by himself” entirely and thereby deliberately affirms that he is praying out loud. Marshall observes that “Jewish practice was to pray aloud” (Marshall, 679). This possibility adds further color. The Pharisee is thus preaching to the “less fortunate unwashed” around him. They have little chance to get a good look at a truly “righteous” man like himself, and he is “graciously” offering them a few words of judgment along with some instruction in righteousness. (Most of us, at some point in our worship experience, have been obliged to listen to some misguided soul insult his neighbors in a public prayer.) The officiating priest (as we have observed) is most likely in the Holy Place offering up the incense. At this particular point in the service the delegation of Israel was responsible for making the unclean stand at the eastern gate (Mishna *Tamid* 5:6, Danby, 587). The Pharisee may be wondering why this publican was not ushered out. In any case, during this pause in the liturgy, the Pharisee probably takes advantage of the opportunity to instruct the “unrighteous” around him.

The opening volley of the Pharisee’s attack on his fellow worshipers reveals more of himself than he perhaps intended. Prayer in Jewish piety involved primarily the offering of thanks/praise to God for all of His gifts, and petitions for the worshiper’s needs. This Pharisee does neither. He does not thank God for His gifts but rather boasts of his own self-achieved righteousness. He has no requests. Thus his words do not fall under the category of prayer at all but degenerate to mere self-advertisement. Jeremias translates a striking illustration of a similar prayer from the period (Jeremias, *Parables*, 142; B.T. *Berakhoth* 28b, Sonc., 172; cf. Edersheim, *Life*, II, 291). Thus Jesus is not portraying a caricature but a reality most likely known to his audience. We have taken the option of translating the *hoti* as “because” rather than “that,” since the former strengthens the self-congratulatory thrust of his opening sentence. As he proceeds the prayer goes “from bad to worse.”

3 “ ‘extortioners, unjust, adulterers,
even like this tax collector.’ “

TAX COLLECTOR
(THE IMAGE)

These first two words can also be translated *rogues* and *swindlers* (Jeremias, *Parables*, 140). Obviously the words are selected because they specifically apply to the tax collector, who is already spotted standing at some distance. The tax farmers of the Roman empire were traditionally known as extortioners and swindlers. The third word, “adulterers,” is thrown in by the Pharisee for good measure (like the older son in Luke 15:30). It tells us nothing about the tax collector but does inform us regarding the mindset of the speaker. Ibn al-Ṣalībī makes the thoughtful comment,

We know that the one who is not a thief and adulterer is not necessarily a good man. Furthermore experience demonstrates that the search for the faults and failures of others does the greatest harm of all to the critic himself and thus such action must be avoided at all costs (Ibn al- Ṣalībī, II, 181).

Thus we see a man tearing up the fabric of his own spirituality.

The point at issue in this stanza is the translation of the beginning of the second line (*ē kai hōs*). We need to examine the first word *ē* and the third, *hōs*. The question is, Are we presented with two lists or one? Is the Pharisee saying, I am not like type A (extortioners, unjust, adulterers), nor am I like type B (tax collectors)? Or do we have one list, of which the tax collector is a part and an illustration? We will attempt to demonstrate the second.

A clear translation of the traditional view of this stanza is found in the Good News Bible of the United Bible Societies, which reads, “I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there.” The particle *ē* is the key word in making our choice between the two alternatives suggested above. This particle is relatively rare in Matthew and Mark but common in Luke. In Luke it occurs only eight times in the opening chapters and six times in the passion narrative, but in the central section (9:51–19:49) it is found twenty-three times. Thus it is especially important to observe its use here in the central section. As a word this particle is often translated “or.” Yet, as an English word, the particle “or” exclusively joins contrasting elements in a sentence. Someone is asked, “Do you want this or that?” The weight of usage and thus meaning is that of joining contrasting items. However, the Greek particle *ē* can join either contrasting or similar elements in a sentence. Bauer observes that this particle can separate “opposites, which are mutually exclusive,” or it can separate “related and similar terms, where one can

take the place of the other or one supplements the other” (Bauer, 342). He then lists Matthew 5:17 as a clear case of the latter. For this verse the RSV reads, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and (\bar{e}) the prophets.” Here the continuity and similarity of the two terms (“law” and “prophets”) are so close that \bar{e} is translated “and.” In the Travel Narrative in Luke, nineteen of the twenty-three occurrences of \bar{e} separate *similar* terms. In only five cases does it separate *contrasting* elements. In four texts the \bar{e} could just as easily be translated “and,” as in Matthew 5:17 (cf. Luke 11:12; 13:4; 14:31; 15:8). An interesting case of the use of \bar{e} as a particle connecting similar terms is in Luke 17:23. In this verse we have three textual alternatives. These are:

- ‘Lo, there,’ or ‘Lo, here,’
- ‘Lo, there,’ and ‘Lo, here,’
- ‘Lo, there,’ ‘Lo, here,’

That is, the particle \bar{e} so often connects similar terms that in the textual tradition it is at times replaced by *kai* (“and”) or omitted and in translation replaced with a comma. In summary, we can see that \bar{e} in the Travel Narrative connects similar (not contrasting) terms in three out of four cases. In some texts it can be translated with an English “and” and perhaps even replaced with a comma. The English word “or,” which inevitably implies contrasting terms, is thus inadequate. In our text here in 18:11, with adjectives especially selected to apply to tax collectors, we clearly have a case of similar and not contrasting terms. Thus our translation should communicate this linkage of similar terms. The precise combination of \bar{e} *kai* that we have in this text also occurs in 11:11, 12 (?). There also it connects similar and not contrasting terms. To this must be added an examination of *hōs*.

The Greek word *hōs* (“like”) is a comparative particle common throughout the New Testament. However, one of its “noteworthy uses” (Bauer, 906) is to introduce an example. The longer text of Luke 9:54 reads, “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them as (*hōs*) Elijah did?” The general statement occurs first, then the specific illustration introduced by *hōs*. The same usage occurs in I Peter 3:6, where a general statement about submissive wives is made and then Sarah (introduced with the word *hōs*) is mentioned as a specific illustration. The well-known phrase “as (*hōs*) it is written” is another common example of this use of *hōs* (cf. Luke 3:4). We would submit that our text here is a further case of this special use of *hōs*.

In summary, the Pharisee gives a list of characteristics selected to apply to the tax collector standing nearby. He concludes his list with an illustration, the tax collector himself. The *ē* connects the similar/identical terms. We opt for joining the adjectives with the illustration and translating “even like this tax collector.” Thus the prayer comes through as a ruthless attack on a stereotype, a public accusation of a fellow worshiper at the great altar, that is based on preconceived notions formulated by the Pharisee’s own self-righteousness, which he then proudly displays.

4 “‘I fast twice a week.

HIS SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

I give tithes of all that I possess.”

The basis of the Pharisee’s assumption of righteousness is here verbalized. Moses stipulated a fast for the day of atonement (Lev. 25:29; Num. 39:7). This man goes far beyond that admonition and fasts twice *each* week, a practice that “was confined to certain circles among the Pharisees and their disciples” (Safrai, *JPFC*, II, 816). Regarding the tithe, the Old Testament regulation was clear and limited. Tithes were levied on grain, wine, and oil (Lev. 27:30; Num. 18:27; Deut. 12:17; 14:13). But as Safrai observes, “in tannaitic times the law was extended to take in anything used as food” (Safrai, *JPFC*, II, 825; cf. Mishna *Maaseroth* 1:1, Danby, 66). But even this ruling had exceptions because rue, purslane, celery, and other agricultural products were exempt (Mishna *Shebiith* 9:1, Danby, 49). The practice of tithing nonagricultural products was just beginning to appear, and “the custom was never really widespread, and was confined to those who were particularly strict” (Safrai, *JPFC*, II, 825). Even tax collectors paid *some* tithe (*ibid.*, 819). But this Pharisee—well, he tithed *everything*. Ibn al-Ṣalībī observes, “He is comparing himself with the great examples of righteousness like Moses and the Prophets” (Ibn al-Ṣalībī, II, 181). His acts are works of supererogation (Jeremias, *Parables*, 140). Amos had some sharp words for this type of religion (cf. Amos 4:4). Indeed, we have a picture of a man who prides himself on his more than perfect observance of his religion.

This stanza is the climactic center. We can see the move to this climax in the flow of the action in the previous lines. Standing aloof lest he be defiled by the “unrighteous” around him, he congratulates himself (2) and offers scathing criticism of a tax collector nearby (3). He then brags of having not only kept the

law but exceeded its demands (4). The dramatic point of turning is then introduced as the major themes begin to repeat, but with a difference.

5 “But the tax collector, standing afar off,
would not even lift up his eyes to heaven,”

TAX COLLECTOR
(THE REALITY)

The point of turning in the literary form is intense and dramatic. The image of the tax collector in the mind of the Pharisee (3) is in sharp contrast to the reality of the broken, humble man standing some distance away from the assembled worshipers (5). This same contrast between image (seen through self-righteous eyes) and reality was observed above in our study of Simon and the woman in Luke 7:36–50. There also a self-righteous man looked on a dramatic expression of genuine piety and saw only a defiling sinner to be scrupulously avoided.

This repentant tax collector does not stand aloof but “afar off,” for he feels he is not worthy to stand with God’s people before the altar. As he comes to voice his petition, he (like the woman in 7:38) breaks into an unexpected dramatic action.

6 “but beat upon his chest saying,
‘God! Make an atonement for me, a sinner.’ “

HIS MANNER
HIS PRAYER

The accepted posture for prayer was to cross the hands over the chest and keep the eyes cast down (Edersheim, *Temple*, 156). But this man’s crossed arms do not remain immobile. Rather he beats on his chest. This dramatic gesture is still used in villages all across the Middle East from Iraq to Egypt. The hands are closed into fists that are then struck on the chest in rapid succession. The gesture is used in times of extreme anguish or intense anger. It never occurs in the Old Testament, and appears only twice in the Gospels, both times in Luke. The remarkable feature of this particular gesture is the fact that it is characteristic of women, *not men*. After twenty years of observation I have found only one occasion in which Middle Eastern *men* are accustomed to beat on their chests. This is at the *‘Ashūra* ritual of Shiite Islam. This ritual is an enactment of the murder of Hussein, the son of Ali (the son-in-law of the prophet of Islam). The murder scene is dramatically presented and the devotees lacerate their shaved heads with knives and razors in a demonstration of intense anguish as they recollect this community-forming event. At this ritual the *men* beat on their chests. Women customarily beat on their chests at funerals, but men do not. For men it is a gesture of *extreme* sorrow and anguish and it is almost never used. It is little wonder that in all of biblical literature we find

this particular gesture mentioned only here and at the cross (Luke 23:48). There we are told that “*all* the multitude” went home beating on their chests. The crowd naturally included men and women. Indeed, it takes something of the magnitude of Golgotha to evoke this gesture from Middle Eastern men.

Furthermore, we are told that he beats on his *chest*. Why the chest? The reason for this is given in an early Jewish commentary on Ecclesiastes 7:2:

R. Mana said: *And the Living will lay it to his heart*: these are the righteous who set their death over against their heart; and why do they beat upon their heart? as though to say, “All is there,” (note: ... the righteous beat their heart as the source of evil longing.) (*Midrash Rabbah*, EccL VII,2,5, Sonc., 177).

The same underlying rationale is affirmed by Ibn al-Ṣalībī in his eleventh-century commentary where he writes regarding the tax collector,

his heart in his chest was the source of all his evil thoughts so he was beating it as evidence of his pain as some people do in their remorse, for they beat upon their chests (Ibn al-Ṣalībī, II, 182).

Thus this classical Middle Eastern gesture is a profound recognition of the truth of the fact that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder ... theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:19). This kind of background gives us a picture of the depth of the tax collector’s remorse. What then is his specific prayer?

For centuries the Church, East and West, has translated *hilasthēti moi* in this text as “have mercy on me.” However, later in the same chapter the blind man cries out, *eleēson me* (18:38), which clearly means “have mercy on me.” But this common Greek phrase is not used in 18:13. Our word *hilaskomai* occurs as a verb only here and in Hebrews 2:17. As a noun it appears four times (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:5; I John 2:2; 4:10), and it clearly refers to the atonement sacrifice. Expiation and propitiation as English words must be combined with cleansing and reconciliation to give the meaning of the Hebrew *kaffar*, which lies behind the Greek *hilaskomai*. The tax collector is not offering a generalized prayer for God’s mercy. He specifically yearns for the benefits of an atonement. Both the classical Armenian and the Harclean Syriac versions of the early centuries of the life of the Church translate our text literally as “make an atonement for me.” Dalman’s brief account helps set the total scene. He describes the temple area:

One coming here in order to pray at the time of the evening sacrifice i.e. at the ninth hour (three o'clock in the afternoon) ... would see first of all the slaughtering and cutting up of the sacrificial lamb, and would then notice that a priest went to the Holy Place to burn incense (Lk. i.9). Both these were acts at which the Israelite was not merely an onlooker, for they were performed in the name of the people, of whom the priest was a representative, in order to affirm daily Israel's relationship to God, according to His command; and when, after the censuring from the steps to the ante-hall was accomplished, the priests pronounced the blessing with outstretched hands ... and put God's Name upon the children of Israel ... it was for the reception of the blessing that the people "bowed themselves" (Ecclus. 1.21) to the ground on hearing the ineffable Name. ... This was followed, in the consciousness that God would graciously accept the gift, by the bringing of the sacrifice to the altar (Dalman, *Sacred*, 303).

Dalman goes on to explain the other elements of the liturgy, the clash of cymbal, the blasts on the trumpets, the reading of the Psalms, the singing of the choir of the Levites, and the final prostration of the people. On reading Dalman and Edersheim (*Temple*, 156f.) one can almost smell the pungent incense, hear the loud clash of cymbals, and see the great cloud of dense smoke rising from the burnt offering. The tax collector is there. He stands afar off, anxious not to be seen, sensing his unworthiness to stand with the participants. In brokenness he longs to be a part of it all. He yearns that he might stand with "the righteous." In deep remorse he strikes his chest and cries out in repentance and hope, "O God! Let it be for me! Make an atonement for me, a sinner!" There in the temple this humble man, aware of his own sin and unworthiness, with no merit of his own to commend him, longs that the great dramatic atonement sacrifice might apply to him. The last stanza tells us that indeed it does.

7 "I tell you, he went down to his house
made righteous, rather than that one."

GO DOWN
TAX COLLECTOR, PHARISEE

In stanza 1 two went up to the temple at the same hour with the Pharisee in the lead. Now the same two go down (again at the same time). The service is over. The tax collector is now mentioned first. *He* is the one justified in God's presence. For centuries the Church debated whether the sacraments have an automatic effect on the believer irrespective of his spiritual state. Here in this simple parable we already have an answer, and the answer is no! The Pharisee was wasting his time. The self-righteous returns home unjustified. Indeed as Ibn al-Şaïlbī notes, "The false pride of the Pharisee has intensified his guilty condition and increased his sin" (Ibn al-

Ṣalībī, II, 182). The sacrifice of the lamb for the sins of the people is made—but the broken of heart, who come in unworthiness trusting in God’s atonement, they alone are made right with God. With this the parable ends. A general statement is then attached as a summarizing conclusion.

CONCLUSION

For every one who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

This statement, in various forms, occurs in a number of places in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; I Pet. 5:6). It is an antithetical parallelism and is quite likely a proverb of Jesus that Luke or his source may have attached to the end of the parable, which comes to its own conclusion. At the same time, a significant number of the major parables have wisdom sayings attached to their conclusions (cf. Luke 8:8; 12:21, 48; 16:8b; 18:8b; 19:26). There is no reason to deny that Jesus could have attached wisdom sayings to his own parables. This may be the case here. In any event, the saying is profoundly appropriate to the parable and focuses on its major topic of righteousness. As we observed above, either Luke or his source attached an introduction to the parable that highlighted the theme of righteousness and how it is achieved. That introduction is here balanced by this concluding wisdom saying, which discusses the same theme.

This final verse affirms that only the humble will be exalted. The great word “exaltation” has an important place in New Testament theology in relation to the person of Christ. Here, however, we see it used in its Old Testament sense. In regard to this Old Testament usage, Bertram writes, “As God’s name alone is exalted ... so He alone can elevate and exalt men” (Bertram, *TDNT*, VIII, 606). Thus “exalt” approaches the meaning “deliver, redeem” (*ibid.*, 607). Bertram explains, “Exaltation means drawing close to God; the righteous man who is meek and humble may hope for this and claim it” (*ibid.*). In regard to the use of this word in the synoptic Gospels Bertram observes, “Along the lines of the Old Testament revelation of God all exaltation on man’s part is repudiated.... Exaltation is the act of God alone” (*ibid.*, 608). Thus it is clear that verse 14 in our text is not talking about social rank or man’s humility or elevation among his fellow men. Again Bertram observes that exaltation “always has an eschatological reference for the Christian hearer and reader” (*ibid.*). Clearly the verse has to do

with man being elevated in relation to God. As in the Old Testament it is almost synonymous with “to deliver” and “to redeem.” The introduction to the parable speaks of those who elevate themselves (that is, consider themselves righteous) and humiliate others (that is, despise others). At the end, the self-exalted is humbled and the humble one is exalted.

Finally, then, what is the original listener pressed to understand or do, and what motifs comprise the theological cluster of the parable?

The original self-righteous audience is pressed to reconsider how righteousness is achieved. Jesus proclaims that righteousness is a gift of God made possible by means of the atonement sacrifice, which is received by those who, in humility, approach as sinners trusting in God’s grace and not their own righteousness. As Jeremias has succinctly observed, ‘Our passage shows ... that the Pauline doctrine of justification has its roots in the teaching of Jesus’ (Jeremias, *Parables*, 114).

The theological motifs present in the parable include the following:

1. Righteousness is a gift of God granted by means of the atonement sacrifice to sinners who come to Him in confession of their sin and in a full awareness of their own inability to achieve righteousness.
2. The atonement sacrifice is worthless to anyone who assumes self-righteousness.
3. There is a pattern for prayer set forth. Self-congratulation, boasting of pious achievements, and criticism of others are not appropriate subjects for prayer. A humble confession of sin and need, offered in hope that through the atonement sacrifice this sin might be covered and those needs met, is an appropriate subject for prayer. Along with the subjects for prayer appropriate attitudes for prayer are also presented. Pride has no place. Humility is required.
4. The keeping of the law, and even the achieving of a standard beyond the requirements of the law, does not secure righteousness.
5. Self-righteousness distorts the vision. A profoundly moving demonstration of remorse was enacted by a sincerely repentant man before the eyes of the self-righteous Pharisee. He saw only a sinner to be avoided.

The parable has no evident Christology. The atonement service highlighted is that of the Old Testament. The person of Jesus and his role in salvation history is nowhere mentioned or suggested. Yet a rich theological understanding of righteousness through atonement is set forth in clear and unforgettable terms. This understanding (we would suggest) then becomes the foundation of the early

Church's theology. In short, the starting point for the New Testament understanding of righteousness through atonement is traceable to no less than Jesus of Nazareth.