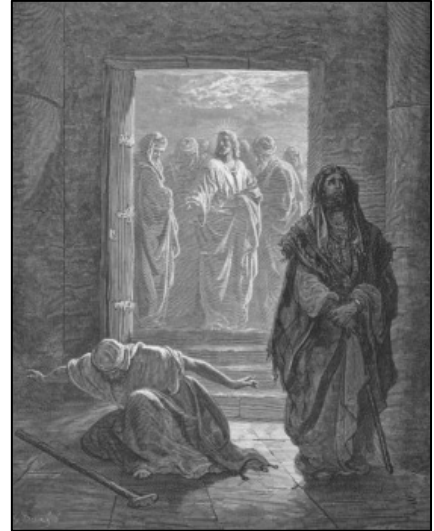


## The Widow and the Unjust Judge The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

*Luke 18:1-14*

### BACKGROUND ON THE PHARISEE & TAX COLLECTOR

- The law required fasting on the Day of Atonement, so the Pharisee was going above and beyond. The pious often did this, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. The Pharisee also went beyond the Law in his tithing. The Law required tithing on certain crops (Dt 14:22), but Pharisees tithed even on garden herbs (11:42).
- “Have mercy on me” in 18:13b has the sense of propitiation or reconciliation. “Normally, such a propitiation, reconciliation or atonement was made by a sacrifice at the Temple.”<sup>1</sup>
- To atone for his sins the tax collector might be expected to “give up his profession and pay restitution of the amount he had cheated others out of, plus one-fifth (Lev 6:5; Num 5:7)...” [ibid.]



### THE WIDOW AND THE UNJUST JUDGE

1. What is the longest period of time you have ever prayed for something? What's the *biggest* thing you've ever prayed for over a long period of time?
2. Ronald Goetz (*Christian Century*, Jan 29, 1997, p. 96), in thinking about this parable, writes:

If Jesus' confidence in petitionary prayer is well founded, we are led to an astonishing ontological recognition: that God rules the world in constant consultation with those who pray, that God's determinations are wrought in dialogue with those who call for help. To be sure, the Lord God is Lord indeed. Humanity proposes, God disposes. Nonetheless, we are assured, despite the fact that God is not bound to our pleas, that God's determinations are not unaffected by our pleas. The Lord God is Lord indeed, and therefore, God is free to rule unbounded by the humanly inferred laws of finite nature and free to rule in spontaneous dialogue with us. Prayer, thus, is unfathomably powerful, yet it also places an enormous obligation upon us to pray constantly for the needs of the world. In terms of Christian service to the world, prayer is no substitute for good works, and good works are no substitute for prayer.

Given the peculiar ways we seek to communicate with the transcendent God (we speak or write to him; we hear him through scripture; through the words of others; through the nudging of the HS), what does it mean to collaborate with God?

### THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

3. Capon, in his sermon on this parable (*Parables of Grace*, pp. 178-84) insists that the point of the parable holds even if the tax collector doesn't reform after he leaves the Temple. Can this assertion be reconciled with, say, the parable of the sheep & the goats (Mt 25:31-46) and Mt 5:17-20, esp. v. 20, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Or—if we are harshing on Capon too much—is he just rephrasing Eph 2:8?)

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Friedrichsen, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 124, 89 (2005).

4. In the Orthodox “Jesus Prayer”, one meditates by repeating the prayer of the tax collector: “Lord Jesus, son of God” while inhaling, and “Have mercy on me, a sinner” while exhaling. This meditative technique is meant to follow Paul’s exhortation to pray without ceasing. The abject spiritual poverty of the tax collector is thereby always kept in mind, even for the most mature and Christ-like Christian.

However, Frederick Holmgren (*Interpretation*, 48, 1994, pp. 252-261) writes:

The parable in Luke 18 focuses on the Pharisee and those who are like him; it is intended to be a mirror in which ‘Pharisaic’ persons may ‘see’ themselves. Although this is the original intention of the story, experience in living tells us that genuine religion is threatened not only by the ‘works program’ of the Pharisee but also by ‘tax collector theology.’ It is not healthy or helpful to go through life with eyes to the ground, hands striking the breast, and crying out, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’

What do you think? [You might also compare the tax collector’s attitude with Paul in 1 Cor 9:24-27.]

5. Timothy Friedrichsen [ibid.] writes:

Before specifically identifying the two people [in the parable], Jesus opens his parable by setting it in the Temple area. As the concrete embodiment of Jewish identity and tradition, the Temple is a third character in the parable, along with the Pharisee and tax collector. Because the Temple was the primary system by which Israel knew its God and fulfilled its sacred obligations... the outcome of the parable will say something... about the institution in whose shadow the drama unfolds.

Discuss. Cf. Ps 51:19.

6. Roberta Bondi (*Christian Century*, Oct 19, 2004, p. 22) writes:

[The] questions [of what the Pharisee had done to make God reject him] remained lodged [in my mind] for many years until I ran into an exposition of the parable by the great monastic teacher Dorotheos of Gaza, which he preached to men in his community who apparently were making everybody miserable by inflicting a lot of self-righteousness and judgmentalism upon each other.

Surprisingly, he did not use it to make his monks stop bragging, ignore their own good deeds and acknowledge that they were sinners. Dorotheos said that the Pharisee was doing the right thing when he thanked God for giving him the ability to do good—as should they (the monks) themselves. The Pharisee only did one thing wrong: he passed judgment on the whole person of the tax collector and with scorn dismissed him and his whole life as worthless.

Compare Dorotheos’ interpretation with Capon’s, Luke’s (18:9) and Jesus’ (18:14). Who’s right?

✳

*Fun Fact:* The Qumran Essenes disdainfully referred to the Pharisees as “seekers of smooth things.” [*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels.*]