

Study Notes: Luke 18:9-14
March 8, 2026: “A Humble Cry for Mercy”
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To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

- At the outset of this parable, Luke explains who is the intended audience of the parable, those who were confident in their own righteousness. This parable is designed to remind such people that God seeks people who are humble, and that the people who depend wholly on His mercy will be justified.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

- Jesus’ parable is about two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee would have been viewed as the religious man who was set apart, while the tax collector would have been seen as the sinner.
- The Pharisee assumed the common position of prayer, and given what Jesus said about the tax collector’s position, it is likely that the Pharisee stood in a prominent position to be seen.
- The Pharisee was not contrite, but focused on himself and how he was far better than other people, instead. The Pharisee then spoke of the things that he did, fasting and tithing. None of the Pharisees’ actions were wrong (fasting and tithing are good things), but they focused wholly on himself and his own goodness, rather than seeking God’s mercy.
 - The New American Commentary states, “If humility toward God and compassion for neighbor are excluded, the Pharisee possessed an impeccable life-style. But humility toward God and compassion for neighbor are the essence of true piety.”

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

- Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector humbly realized his need for grace and mercy. He took an attitude of contrition standing far off, beating his breast and pleading for God to have mercy on him.
- The Faithlife Study Bible explains, “His location, posture, and speech reveal his humility and recognition of his sinfulness—a stunning contrast to the self-righteous Pharisee.”

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- In what would have been seen as a shocking reversal to the original listener’s, it was the tax collector who was justified, rather than the Pharisee.
 - The New American Commentary explains what it means to be justified before God, “This term means more than just being forgiven, for it also involves the gift of a new standing before God. This is evident from 18:9, where the noun is used to describe a ‘righteous’ standing before God (cf. 16:15). The publican stood before God after his prayer possessing a new relationship (not a moral character) with God. He possessed a righteousness given him by grace (cf. Phil 3:8).”
- Jesus then stated a principle that is found throughout Scripture, that God will humble those who exalt themselves, and exalt those who choose to humble themselves (see Proverbs 3:34, James 4:6).