

‘This One Went Down Justified’: An Account of Justification in Luke’s Gospel

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Introduction

This is an exegetical study of Luke 18:9-14, commonly known as the ‘Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector’. I make no claim to great originality or novelty. Instead, I have written this study with the intention of providing a brief but careful analysis of this significant text which will be accessible to students and pastors, will be useful in the context of a preaching and teaching ministry and may, to some extent at least, provide a pattern for exegesis which others may find useful in their own study of the biblical text.

A Tale of Two Men

The account of the Pharisee and the tax collector is unique to Luke’s gospel and is located within Luke’s distinctive ‘travel narrative’ which began in 9:51 and which has, up to this point in the narrative, repeatedly emphasised Jesus’ determination to go to Jerusalem.¹ Indeed, Fitzmyer regards this parable as ‘a fitting finale for the specifically Lucan travel account (9:51-18:14), ending on an important Lucan theme’.² Most scholars, however, would ex-

¹ Luke 9:51 reads ‘when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem’ (ESV). Cf. 9:57; 10:38; 13:22; 17:11 and the apparent conclusion marked by 19:28. It is not necessary to assume that Luke is giving details of a single journey, which view would be virtually impossible to harmonise with Johannine chronology. Craig Blomberg (*Jesus and the Gospels* [Leicester: Apollos, 1997] 288) notes that ‘there are fewer indications of chronology or geography in the subsequent nine chapters than in any other section of comparable length in any Gospel’.

² J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 1183.

tend the travel narrative into chapter 19, usually to 19:27. It may be better to recognise 18:14 as the point at which a distinctive section composed of material either unique to Luke or common to Matthew and Luke – otherwise known as his ‘central section’ – concludes.³ Following, as it does, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, it appears that prayer may have been the common bond which brought these two accounts together in the narrative (cf. 18:1). Yet there is more to this parable than is highlighted by the general heading ‘on prayer’ and perhaps the note of ‘mercy’ (*hilasthēti*, verse 13) is more dominant.⁴ Or perhaps ‘vindication’ is the point of contact between this parable and its predecessor.⁵ The brief contextual remarks provided by Luke in verse 9 explicitly identify what follows as a ‘parable’ and it is therefore important to read the text in the light of that fact. The parable has a clear structure: two men are introduced who ‘go up’ to the same location (the temple) with the same purpose (to pray). The difference between them is found in their descriptions (‘Pharisee’ and ‘tax collector’) and in the content of their prayers. A concluding description of the respective experiences of these two men is then developed into a general principal.

In attempting to understand the purpose of this parable, as well as its theological significance, it is important to pay particular attention to the significant terms ‘righteous’ and ‘justified’, which share the same root (*dik-*) in the Greek text. The setting indicates that Jesus spoke this parable to ‘some who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous’ (9), while the concluding words of Jesus indicate that ‘this one [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than that one’ (14).⁶

The full text of the passage in the ESV reads as follows:

Luke 18:9-15 ⁹ *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:* ¹⁰ *“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.*

³ So D. Wenham and S. Walton, *Exploring the New Testament 1: Introducing the Gospels and Acts* (London: SPCK, 2001) 232; C. A. Evans, *Luke* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990) 160, and the majority of commentators. See D. L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 957, who provides a useful survey of the various proposals for the ending of this section and who himself favours 19:44.

⁴ See Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1184.

⁵ Cf. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1458.

⁶ See K. E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 144.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke clearly identifies the intended targets of Jesus' parable (cf. 18:1; 19:11). They are those who mistakenly have confidence in themselves (ESV: 'trusted in themselves'), their confidence being that 'they were righteous' (cf. Ezek. 33:13) and who therefore treat others with contempt. While these anonymous figures may well have been Pharisees themselves (thus determining Jesus' choice of character for his story),⁷ the parable is applicable to those of any classification who exhibit the attitude of this particular man.⁸ We should not infer that Luke considers the description 'righteous' to be inappropriate for a human being. In fact, a number of figures in Luke's narrative are described as 'righteous' (*dikaios*): Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:6); Simeon (2:25); Jesus (23:47); Joseph of Aramathea (23:50). In these instances, the term is 'an expression describing a moral righteousness that conforms to God's standards',⁹ rather than the more developed sense of the term found in Paul's letters (cf. Rom. 1:17; 5:19).

On the other hand, there are a number of occasions where 'the righteous' is probably not to be regarded in a positive sense: Jesus did not come to call the righteous (5:32); 10:29; 16:15. A few other references are somewhat unclear in their significance: 15:7; 20:20.

The two men 'go up' to the temple partly because it was physically set on a hill but also because it was spiritually the dwelling of Israel's God (cf. Psa. 122:1). That they are said to go 'to pray' does not demand that this is an act of solitary piety. Luke has already used 'praying' to refer to a corporate act of worship by God's people (1:10) and he will later cite Jesus' affirmation (based in Isaiah 56:7) that the temple is 'a house of prayer' (19:46).¹⁰

The reference to the Pharisee in the context of this parable should not be understood as a blanket condemnation of all Pharisees. In fact, Luke occasionally presents Pharisees in a positive light (13:31). Recent research has suggested that not all Pharisees would have prayed in the manner of this particular man.¹¹ R. Hillel is cited as saying 'Do not walk out on the community. And do not have confidence in yourself until the day you die. And do not judge your companion until you are in his place.'¹² Here it is important to remember that we are dealing with a parable which is a literary construct for the purpose of dramatically presenting a point. Liefeld correctly states that

⁷ So J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972) 139.

⁸ Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1185-6.

⁹ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 77.

¹⁰ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 145-6.

¹¹ From later Rabbinic writings, m.Abod 2:4-5; from contemporary non-Pharisaic Judaism, IQS 11:1-2.

¹² M.Abod 2:4. See J. Neusner, *The Classics of Judaism* (Louisville: WJKP, 1995) 78.

‘We need not assume that Jesus’ intention was to criticize Pharisees and commend tax collectors, but to contrast two attitudes.’¹³ Thus, these two characters represent ‘polar opposites in the first-century religious culture. The Pharisees belonged to the most pious movement, while the tax collector was part of the most hated profession’.¹⁴ Josephus describes the Pharisees as ‘a body of Jews known for surpassing the others in the observances of piety and exact interpretation of the laws’.¹⁵ The references to location of these men with respect to others suggests that they have come to the temple at the times for public prayer: 9:00 am (cf. Acts 2:15) or 3:00 pm (cf. Acts 3:1). K. Bailey argues that, since no day is specified, they would thus have been going to either the morning or evening atonement sacrifice, ‘since this was the only *daily* service of public worship in the temple’.¹⁶ He comments further that any worshipper, ‘knew that it was possible for him to address God with his private needs *only* because the atonement sacrifice had taken place’.¹⁷

The Pharisee stands to pray (vs. 11), but this was simply an appropriate posture for prayer and should not be interpreted as an indication of a proud attitude in itself (cf. Hannah in 1 Sam. 1:26). The tax collector also stands (vs. 13) and nothing is said in the text which would indicate that he knelt or adopted any other posture. We are simply told that he did not raise his eyes to heaven.

The Greek phrase *pros heauton* could be translated as ‘to himself’ and then related to the prayer of this Pharisee. This clearly leads to an unflattering statement that he ‘prayed to himself’. In fact, even if we accept this basic meaning, we may understand these words simply to refer to speech that was not clearly audible to other human beings, such as is found in the preceding parable (cf. 18:4, where *en heautō* is used). This might be compared to the praying of Hannah which led to such misunderstanding. However, it is perhaps better to read these words with reference to the act of standing (as does the ESV): ‘the Pharisee standing by himself, prayed these things.’ This reading gives more natural balance to the contrast between the physical locations of the two men as we shall see. Jeremias loosely translates the phrase as, ‘he stood in a prominent position.’¹⁸ Fitzmyer suggests that ‘he moved far to the front of the Court of Israel within the Temple precincts.’¹⁹

The Pharisee’s prayer to ‘God’ (*ho theos*) is a prayer of thanksgiving. Yet it bears none of the characteristics of a truly thankful heart (cf. 1QH 2:20, 31;

¹³ W. Liefeld, ‘Parables on Prayer’ in R. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 240-62, here 260. See also Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1186.

¹⁴ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1461.

¹⁵ Jewish War 1.5.2 sec. 110, cited by Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1186.

¹⁶ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 146.

¹⁷ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 147.

¹⁸ Jeremias, *Parables*, 140.

¹⁹ Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1186.

3:19, 37; 4:5).²⁰ The list of categories to which the Pharisee is confident he does not belong begins with the Greek term *harpax*, that is, a 'thief' or 'extortionist'. The next term used is *adikos*, 'unrighteous' which connects with the 'righteous'/'justified' terms which precede and follow. He then dissociates himself from the *moichos*, the adulterer. The final dismissive and contemptuous reference to 'this tax collector' forms the lowest point in this catalogue of the lowest of the low (cf. the similar use of the demonstrative pronoun *houtos*, 'this one', in 23:35 by those who taunt Jesus), but it also establishes the vital connection between the parable and Luke's explanation of the point of the parable. Here is one who truly 'despises others' (cf. 23:11).

Not only is the Pharisee able to make negative statements in his favour but he also has several positive statements to make. There is, of course, nothing blameworthy in the actions of the Pharisee; they are either mandated by Torah or are not contrary to it. Fasting on the Day of Atonement was required by the Torah (e.g., Lev. 16:29-31; Num. 29:7), but fasting twice per week goes beyond what Torah required.²¹ The normal Jewish pattern was to fast on Mondays and Thursdays.²² Tithing is demanded by the Torah (e.g., Lev. 27:30-32; Num. 18:21-24; Deut. 14:22-27). Some Pharisees seem to have taken the principle to an extreme, however, even tithing herbs (cf. 11:42 and Matt. 23:23).²³

The tax collector also takes up a notable stance; he stands 'afar off', 'probably on the outer edges of the Court of the Gentiles'.²⁴ We might wish to suggest that he was within sight of the Pharisee (cf. verse 11) but this need not be pressed given that the parable is a fictitious story and not a record of actual events. In this case, the reason for physical withdrawal is not a fear of contracting impurity but a piercing awareness of personal impurity.²⁵ The tax collector indicates his distress by means of two physical expressions: he beats his breast and he will not raise his eyes to heaven. Beating one's breast

²⁰ 1QH 10:20-21 (according to M. Wise, M. Abegg and E. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* [London: Harper Collins, 1996]; 2:20-21 in most commentaries and English translations) reads, 'I give thanks to You, O Lord, for You have placed me in the bundle of the living and You protect me from all the snares of the pit.' 10:31 (2:31) reads, 'I give thanks to You, O Lord, for Your eye sta[nds] over my soul, and You have delivered me from the jealousy of the mediators of lies.' 11:19 (3:19) reads, 'I give thanks to You, O Lord, for You have redeemed my soul from the pit.'

²¹ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1463.

²² Dating probably from early in the second century AD, Didache 7:4-8:1 reads, 'You must instruct the one who is to be baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand. But do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday, so you must fast on Wednesday and Friday.'

²³ So Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1463. See also Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1187-88.

²⁴ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1464.

²⁵ The Greek particle *de* ('but') identifies the contrast being made.

is a mark of ‘the deepest contrition’²⁶ (cf. 23:48). That he will not raise his eyes indicates awareness of a ruptured relationship (cf. Psa. 123:1). In addition to these physical acts, the tax collector expresses a brief verbal prayer which is striking in its dissimilarity to the expansive prayer of the Pharisee. The cry of the tax collector is composed of three elements: an address, a request, and a self-evaluation. The address is the same as that of the Pharisee: *ho theos*, ‘God’. It is striking that there is no reference (in either prayer) to the covenant name of God, but this should not be pressed given that Luke wrote his narrative in Greek. The tax collector’s request, often translated ‘have mercy upon me’, might be better translated ‘let me be atoned’²⁷ (*hilasthēti moi*, using the imperative of the verb *hilasthētai*²⁸ which means ‘to propitiate’).²⁹ This request is notable in the context of the parable because it has no counterpart in the prayer of the Pharisee. The self-evaluation is far removed from the self-praise of the Pharisee. In fact, it appears to simply confirm the verdict of the Pharisee: this man is ‘a sinner’. While both men have made a self-evaluation, the tax collector’s is accurate and the Pharisee’s is not. The tax collector is all too aware of his standing before God but does not withdraw himself from God. Instead he approaches God in humility yet requesting the very thing which the vast temple structure and the smoke rising from the altar declare to be available – atonement for sin.

The story now complete, Jesus wields this carefully crafted literary weapon so as to unveil a staggering reversal of expectations; a feature not uncommon in Luke’s gospel (cf. 14:11). The introductory formula (*legō humin*, ‘I say to you’) prepares the reader for a statement of significance.³⁰ The use of demonstrative pronouns with reference to the men is striking. The man who stood ‘afar off’ is identified by the pronoun of proximity (‘this [one]’) while the apparent insider is distanced by ‘that [one]’.³¹ The term of abuse on the lips of the Pharisee has ironically become a marker of acceptance. That they ‘went down’ is the appropriate counterpart of ‘they went up’ (10). It is also a mark of completion of the activity in the temple. However, completion of the activity has not brought the same result for both men. ‘This man’ (the tax collector) went down ‘having been justified’ or ‘having found favour’.³²

²⁶ So Jeremias, *Parables*, 141.

²⁷ C. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Leicester: Apollon, 1990) 258. See the discussion in Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 154.

²⁸ The only occurrence of the verb in Luke-Acts and one of only two occurrences in the NT (cf. Heb. 2:17) although the cognate terms *hilastērion* and *hilasmos* are found elsewhere. See especially L. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 144-213.

²⁹ Cf. the natural phrase for ‘have mercy upon me’ in 18:38, *eleēson me*.

³⁰ Cf. 3:8 and the numerous references cited there.

³¹ Cf. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1465: ‘Position in the temple means nothing; the position of the heart means everything.’

³² See Jeremias, *Parables*, 141. 4 Ezra [2 Esdras] 12:7 (translated from a Latin text) reads, ‘And I said, “O sovereign Lord, if I have found favour in thy sight and if I

The passive voice of the Greek subtly indicates that the God of Israel, who makes himself known in the temple, is the one who has acted in mercy towards this man.³³ It is interesting that the language which Luke employs here bears a strong similarity to Pauline discussions of justification. Jeremias comments, 'Our passage is the only one in the Gospels in which the verb *dikaion* is used in a sense similar to that in which Paul generally uses it.'³⁴ While we should be wary of reading the fully developed Pauline concept of justification into Luke's narrative here, we may nonetheless say with Jeremias that this passage shows 'that the Pauline doctrine of justification has its roots in the teaching of Jesus.'³⁵

The Pharisee, however, has not received mercy, which should hardly be surprising since he did not request it! No doubt he left the temple with a great sense of satisfaction in his meticulous religious observance. Jesus says nothing to suggest any disruption to the Pharisee's perception of himself. He simply declares that he did not find God's favour.

The reason for the different outcomes is identified with a memorable, chistic saying. God seeks humility. There is nothing new in this (Ezek 21:26; Psalm 107:40-41; Psalm 113:7-9).

Application

Self-justification is not a trait unique to ancient Pharisees. In fact, modern readers who expect the Pharisees to be the 'bad guys' should not overlook that this is the exact opposite of the natural expectation of a first-century reader who was familiar with the structures of Jewish society. Those who have known and continue to know the blessing of life among the people of God must nonetheless recognise that, whatever privileges are theirs, the self-evaluation of the tax collector must be theirs no less. To preen our feathers in God's sight is an awesome misjudgement. Yet, we must beware of an equal error which is to be in the very presence of mercy and not to seek it. This is as foolish in the case of someone conscious of sin as it is in the case of someone denying it. Let us learn from the tax collector to seek what is made freely available in Christ.

With respect to despising others, those who are empowered by the Spirit of God should not be found wanting in holiness while still reflecting the Lord's own love for those who are on the margins.

have been accounted righteous before many others, and if my prayer has indeed come up before thy face..."

³³ So Jeremias, *Parables*, 141.

³⁴ Jeremias, *Parables*, 141.

³⁵ Jeremias, *Parables*, 141.