

CAPITOL STUDIES

MARCH 18, 2026 • WEEK 10



LUKE FOR LEGISLATORS SECOND SESSION

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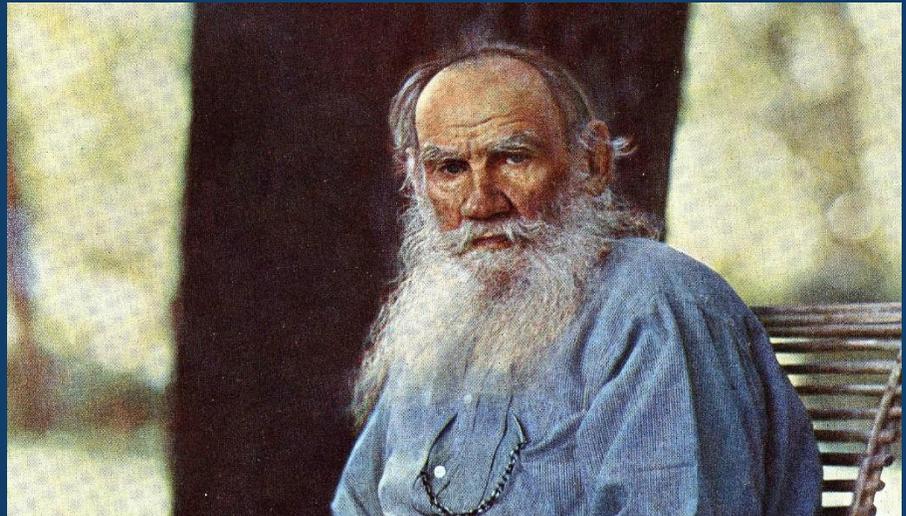
Theme Verse

Luke 19:10

For the Son of Man has come to **seek** and to **save** that which was **lost**.



The Pharisee & the Publican



PASTOR AND THEOLOGIAN R. KENT HUGHES comments that “Those who have read *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina* or short stories like ‘How Much Land Does a Man Need?’ agree that Leo Tolstoy was a great novelist. Some would say he is the greatest of novelists. His writings have a moral force to them, and much of what he says is personally helpful. Nevertheless, Tolstoy’s morality was not God-centered but self-centered. He defined God as ‘the desire for universal welfare’—and insofar as Tolstoy saw himself as embodying this desire, he was God. Having so defined God, he wrote in his diary, ‘Help, father, come and dwell within me. You already dwell within me. You are already *me*.’ Historian Paul Johnson writes, ‘There were times when Tolstoy seemed to think of himself as God’s brother, indeed his elder brother.’ Tolstoy once wrote: ‘Read a work on the literary characterization of genius today, and this awoke in me the conviction that I am a remarkable man both as regards capacity and eagerness to work. I have not yet met a single man who was morally as good as I.... I do not remember an instance in my life when I was not attracted to what is good and was not ready to sacrifice anything to it.’ He felt in his own soul ‘immeasurable grandeur.’”¹

Arin Hess

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INTRODUCTION

“Tolstoy saw himself as above the rest of humanity, as part of an apostolic succession of moral superiors that included the likes of Moses, Isaiah, Confucius, the early Greeks, Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Pascal, and Spinoza. It could be said... that Leo Tolstoy was ‘confident of [his] own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,’”² just like the Pharisee in today’s parable.

Last week, in the parable of the persistent widow, “we learned that persistence in prayer shows what we think of God—that we are confident that He is gracious and caring. In this parable we learn that our prayers unwittingly reveal what we think of ourselves.”³ “Here Jesus gives two prayers—one by a Pharisee and one by a publican. One leads to Heaven, and one leads to Hell.”⁴

I. PEOPLE IN THE PARABLE

Luke 18:9-10

And [Jesus] also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”⁵

A. The Self-Righteous Pharisee

This person does more “good” works than anyone else. He follows the Law to the letter and is the most highly respected person in Jewish society. To the Jewish audience, he is the “good guy.” He views “God’s relationship with humanity as a moral high-jump contest in which the best performers [are] saved and underachievers [are] judged.”⁶ He has likely been swindled by a tax collector at some time, so to hear the sinful tax collector pray is very revolting.

B. The Sinful Publican

The tax collector, or publican, is a corrupt Jew, hired by the Romans to collect tax money from the Jews. He charges more than is necessary and pockets the extra. Consequently, he is hated by almost everyone. “Such tax collectors were considered monsters, and in fact some were. They were religious and political traitors to Hebrew society—utterly despicable. They were disallowed from public office and were barred from giving testimony in court. They were outcasts, untouchable. In today’s culture, the closest social equivalent would be drug pushers and pimps, those who prey on society, who make money off others’ bodies and make a living of stealing from others.”⁷ To the Jews, he is definitely the “bad guy.”





II. PHARISEE'S PUBLIC PRAYER: *PORTRAIT OF A RELIGIOUS PERFORMER*

Luke 18:11-12

The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get."

"When this man comes to the temple to pray, he is coming to his place to do his thing. He is a religious man who feels very comfortable in a religious setting. Standing to pray, as he does, was the common posture, as a trip to the Western Wall in Jerusalem today will demonstrate, and it was not unusual to pray aloud so that others could hear. None of this is unexpected or unusual. This is what a Pharisee does ordinarily.... He stands tall, convinced that he belongs in a class by himself, towering above others. He is impressed, not by what he is like compared with God, but by what he is like compared with others—robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and tax-gatherers."⁸

Note the wording: "praying this to himself." His prayer is really a monologue about himself. He is not talking to God at all, nor does he truly care about God. Five times he uses the word "I," always in reference to his being better than someone else. Jewish Law says to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. He fasts twice a week. He measures out tithes from everything that he gets—great or small. He believes God accepts him because of all his good works.

The Pharisee is **confident** in who he is.
He is **contemptuous** toward those who do not measure up.
He is **conceited** about all his good works.

III. PUBLICAN'S PENITENT PRAYER: *PORTRAIT OF A SPIRITUAL PAUPER*

Luke 18:13

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

The publican stands some "distance away" with his head bowed in shame. He knows he is unworthy of God's recognition at all. He is consumed with sorrow for his sin. He makes no excuses. He begs for mercy. "'Be merciful' equates to the Hebrew *kippur*, as in *Yom Kippur*, or *Day of Atonement*. The mercy he requested was atoning grace."⁹ "The term he uses speaks of a place in the temple, the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, where sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement to make it possible for sinful people to have fellowship with a holy God."¹⁰ As Paul states in Romans, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; [but] they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as the *mercy seat* by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his





righteousness... at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:23-26, CSB).

The publican calls himself “the sinner.” This is the same terminology David uses in Psalm 51, where he cries out for forgiveness for his adultery and the murder he committed: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge” (Psalm 51:3-4). Both David and the publican penitently come to be made righteous before a holy God.

The publican is **repentant** of his thievery, extortion, and other sins. He is **reverent** and humble before a holy God. He desires to be **righteous**.

IV. PARDON THROUGH PRAYER

Luke 18:14

I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

“**Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart**” (1 Samuel 16:7b). “In human courts, one must prove his or her innocence to be declared just by the judge, but in God’s courtroom, one may emerge justified only by grace.... In verse 14, Jesus juxtaposed two terms, ‘exalt’ and ‘humble.’ ‘Exalt derives from a Greek term that means ‘to lift up’; the Greek adjective translated ‘humble’ renders a verb that means ‘to make low, make small or insignificant.’ ... ‘[E]xalt’ describes the Pharisee’s attempt to justify himself, to prove himself righteous before God. Because everyone stands irrefutably guilty before our Creator and Judge, this can lead only to being ‘made low,’ a grossly understated description of condemnation to hell.”¹¹

“The publican had no desire to compare himself with the other man but merely cried out, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ Not *a* sinner, but *the* sinner. ‘I am everything people say I am, and more. I will not attempt to make myself look better by comparing myself with someone else. I am *the* sinner’ (cf. 1 Timothy 1:15).”¹² “Humility before God prompts Him to ‘lift up’ the repentant sinner—not to a place of undeserved honor, but all the way to heaven!”¹³

CONCLUSION

“Years ago, a man was about to make a purchase in a drug store when a detective laid his hand on the man’s shoulder and said, ‘You’re under arrest. Come with me.’ Stunned, the man said, ‘What did I do?’ The detective calmly replied, ‘You know what you did. You escaped from the Albany penitentiary several years ago. You went west, got married, and then came back here to live. We’ve been watching you since you returned.’ Quietly, the man admitted, ‘That’s true, but I was sure you’d



never find me. Before you take me in, could we stop by my house so I can talk to my family?’ The officer agreed.

“When they got to his home, the man looked at his wife and asked, ‘Haven’t I been a kind husband and a good father? Haven’t I worked hard to make a living?’ His wife answered, ‘Of course you have, but why are you asking me these questions?’ He then proceeded to explain what had happened and that he was now under arrest. He apparently had hoped that his record as an exemplary husband and father would impress the officer. But the fact was, he was an escaped criminal, and he had to return to prison.”¹⁴ He had to face the consequences for his wrong done.

Many people who profess to be Christians are actually doing the same thing as the Pharisee. They think they are good people and have a hard time understanding how others in our world can live such depraved, sin-filled lives. They think they are better than that. We each must come to the realization that “that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Romans 7:18). Nothing!

“You may be a good person, a faithful churchgoer, and a decent citizen of this community. But God knows the many sins of your heart. All the good deeds in the world cannot pay for the many times you have broken His holy law. If you come into God’s court on judgment day and present your good works, you will be condemned. But if you come as an unworthy sinner who has pleaded for mercy on the basis of Jesus Christ who shed His blood to pay the penalty you deserve, God will declare, ‘Not guilty!’ Make sure first that you understand and apply this personally; then, share with others the wrong and the right way to come to God. Nothing less than yours and their eternal destiny is at stake!”¹⁵

Chaplain Arin Hess

FOOTNOTES

1, 2, 4, 7, 12. R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Crossway Books, 1998, Volume II, pg. 191–192.

3. David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel*, InterVarsity Press, 1987, pg. 293.

5. All Scripture quotations, unless noted, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 Update.

6, 9, 11, 13. Charles Swindoll, *Insights on Luke*, Zondervan, 2012, pg. 422-424.

8, 10. Gary Inrig, *The Parables: Understanding What Jesus Meant*, Discovery House, 1991, pg. 167, 170.

14, 15. Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 82: The Wrong and Right Way to Approach God (Luke 18:9-14),” *Bible.org*, November 7, 1999.



