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STUDY FOR SERMON FROM 8.6.23

SUMMARY

For the person with almost any experience reading through the gospel accounts, introducing “the pharisee” and “the tax collector” might initially appear to be a contrast between bad and worse. In the gospel accounts, neither role is painted in a very positive light, especially the pharisee. However, in the early first-century Jewish culture, the pharisee was looked at with great respect—a religiously moral person doing all the right things. The pharisee was an outstanding man and a leader in the community. On the other hand, the tax collector was hated by society as they were seen as collaborators in Rome’s oppression and thieves who taxed them to Rome’s and the tax collector’s benefits. But Jesus presents an unexpected contrast between the two—both offering up prayers—ultimately signifying that it is *only the tax collector* who walks away “justified” (v. 14). In God’s economy, justification is a legal “not guilty” declaration pronounced over a person because of another’s sacrifice on their behalf. So why was this declaration made for the tax collector and not the pharisee? The central difference is found in their prayers. The pharisee’s prayer focused on what he had done to earn God’s favor; he was trying to *self-justify*. Whereas the tax collector’s prayer, as short as it was, contained everything required to be right in God’s eyes. The tax collector’s prayer, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” reflects at least two essential realities: First, all of us are sinners, unworthy of God’s favor, and *unable* to self-justify. And second, if not for God’s mercy—the substitute *he* provides to pay for our sins—we could never otherwise be justified. The sinner’s only hope to be made right before God is their dying to self and acknowledgment of their need for his loving mercy.

GROUP QUESTIONS

Share something that surprises, encourages, or troubles you from the sermon or your direct reading of Luke 18:9-14.

Do you ever find yourself trying to self-justify before God? In what ways do believers sometimes resemble the pharisee of this parable? Where do you see this occurring in the life of believers?

What practical steps can the believer take to increasingly align themselves with the behavior and posture of the tax collector of this parable? How do you take those steps with it turning into a self-justifying “to-do” list?

If there’s one thing Jesus would want you to walk away believing and receiving as a result of this portion of Scripture, what is that thing?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

As you pray, be sure to include today’s themes in what you bring before God.