

## “Religious Pride – It’s Reality and Consequences”

Lk 18:9-14 (text)

14 July 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

### Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

You might remember that I once told you about a shocking thing I did when I was in the last year of primary school – yes, almost in intermediate!

You see, I was about ten or eleven, and in the biggest primary school in a town called Lichtenburg, South Africa.

At that time, my mother held a temporary teaching position at *another* primary school in the same town!

Now, there always used to be some rivalry between my mum’s school and my school – especially when it came to sport competitions. So, children of both schools were already in the habit of looking down upon another!

Well, one Friday night, there was a gala/fair (we used to call it a “bazaar”) at my mother’s school! And my mother was helping out at one of the stalls. And the school children were queuing up to play games at that stall. And so, it happened that a girl of that school and I arrived simultaneously at that queue. For some or other reason, I couldn’t take it that she aimed for the same place in the queue as I. So, here is the shocking thing I said to her: “Girl, if you had known who I was, you would not have pushed into the queue right in front of me.”

Whoop-de-doo!

Very flabbergasted, she looked at me and asked, “But who are you then?” “Well,” said I, “I am your teacher’s son; yes, I’m the son of Mrs van Huyssteen!”

“Oh,” said she very humbly, “sorry, I didn’t know!” “Please come stand in front of me in the queue!”

Wow! After 55 years, this thing still bothers me! What horrible pride! What “air” I had about myself! How I abused my mother’s position to my advantage!

And that poor girl! I wonder how she must have felt! Looked-down upon? Despised? But how must my Lord have felt!?

My brother & sister, that was pride – *social* pride! In my life I have also seen *racial* pride! And that’s ugly!

But look! Sad and sinful as *social* pride and *racial* pride are, an even sadder thing is *religious* pride – yes, especially when a professing *Christian* looks down upon sinners! Why is that so sad & sinful?

Well, because a Christian has absolutely no grounds on which he could possibly take pride in his salvation! After all, is it not so that every true Christian has been saved by nothing he himself has done, but only by grace through faith in all that our Lord Jesus has achieved for him!?

So, religious pride – no, *any kind* of pride – is an abomination in the eyes of God!

That’s why our Lord tells the parable of our text!

And that’s why v. 9 explicitly says that Christ told this parable to rebuke those *who trusted in themselves that they were righteous (in God’s eyes), and treated others with contempt.*

My brother & sister, for whom, today, is this parable intended? Who should take heed of this parable’s message?

Is it not the churchgoer – the one who has, in his lifetime, heard thousands of sermons – who is pious; also (and especially) the ones who are leaders in the church – yes, the office bearers!?

Well, I pray, as we study again this parable of our Lord, that God will open our eyes and transform our hearts!

So, here's the main message of our text...

**Do you want to be acceptable in God's sight? Then flee from religious pride, and humble yourself before God!**

And here are three points this text allows for us...

- Pride
- Humility
- Christ's Message

### **Pride**

My brother & sister, our Lord Jesus would often have been at the temple in Jerusalem! Yes, He would often have seen & heard, first hand, how people prayed in the temple area! So, when Christ told the parable of our text, He knew exactly what He was talking about! He was not making up fiction!

Well, in v.10, Jesus says, ***“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”***

These two men couldn't have been more different!

Indeed, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector – they were two radical opposites.

A Pharisee lived in the limelight. He was revered by the people, and considered the holiest of all men. We would call him “Churchgoer,” or even better: “Deacon” or “Elder,” or “Pastor!”

And the Tax collector? Well he was *despised* by the people, for every Jew saw him as traitor working with the Romans – yes, with enemies of the Jews! Of course, the Jews also knew that Tax Collectors were law-breakers who worked on the Sabbath.

And so, that's how the people looked at the Pharisee and Tax Collector. But, of course, people can't see the heart!

Well, these two vastly opposites went to the temple to pray.

Now, firstly, Christ describes the Pharisee – and first He describes the Pharisee's *manner*; then the *words* in the Pharisee's prayer.

Here's the Pharisee's Manner: He stood by himself:<sup>1</sup> aloof from others, cool and “distant” – not *physically* distant; no, just in *facial expression & attitude*<sup>2</sup> and with upturned nose!

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<sup>1</sup> I am persuaded by Bailey, K.E. 1983. *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*. Combined Edition – Two Volumes in One. Grand Rapids, MI : WB Eerdmans. p.147f.

Bailey gives seven good reasons why σταθεις προς εαυτον should be read as “stood by himself,” I translate ο Φαρισαϊος σταθεις προς εαυτον ταυτα προσηυχετο· ο θεος as “The Pharisee, having stood by himself, prayed these things: ‘O God, ...’” Furthermore, I agree with the text-critical comment made on this phrase by Metzger (1975:168), “External evidence ... favours the reading ταυτα προς εαυτον, but internally the more difficult sequence seems to be προς εαυτον ταυτα. The latter was ameliorated to read καθ εαυτον ταυτα ..., “[standing] by himself ....” Because of the difficulty of construing προς εαυτον (especially when the words stood next to σταθεις), several witnesses ..... omit the phrase entirely.”

<sup>2</sup> Not friendly or forthcoming; cool and distant: *they were courteous but faintly aloof; an aloof and somewhat austere figure* mid 16th century: from A- (expressing direction) + LOFF. The term was originally an adverb in nautical use, meaning ‘away and to windward!’, i.e. with the ship's head kept close to the wind away from a lee shore etc. towards which it might drift. From this arose the sense ‘at a distance’ (Oxford English Dictionary –

Why did he stand like this?

Well, according to Pharisaic rules, the common people were of lowly rank<sup>3</sup> and morally impure. So, this Pharisee had to make sure that not even the clothes of these people should accidentally brush against him.<sup>4</sup> Yes, the Pharisee stands aloof from the rest – that’s his *manner*.

What about his *words*?

Well, look how far off the mark the *words* of this Pharisee’s prayer were...

You see, Jewish prayers in his day were supposed to consist of two parts:

- Thanks or praise to God for all His gifts, and...
- Petitions for the worshiper’s needs.<sup>5</sup>

This Pharisee does neither!

Firstly, he does not *praise* God for gifts, but rather boasts of his own self-achieved righteousness, “**God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—indeed even<sup>6</sup> like this tax collector**” (v.11).

Secondly, this Pharisee has *no* requests!

You wonder why he prayed at all!

His was no prayer! It was a self-advertisement!

This Pharisee didn’t need God! In his own eyes, he was too smart!

Here is trust in oneself.

His real prayer is “God, I thank you that I am so marvelous.”<sup>7</sup>

Yes, in his own “humble” eyes this Pharisee is not *unrighteous*.

In fact, the Pharisee is sure that he is a blessing to God.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, God’s programme could hardly advance without this man’s contribution.<sup>9</sup>

What overconfidence!

Wow! After hearing this man’s prayer, you & I may well wonder whether God should apply to be his assistant!<sup>10</sup>

And look how this man relied on his own achievements:

You see, God’s Law asked of him to fast *once* a year!<sup>11</sup> Yet, he boasts that he fasts *twice* a *week!!!* (v.12a).

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online). Exactly like the captain of a sail ship would “park/position” his ship when there was an onshore wind. He would turn the ship’s head away from land and let its rear face the land. Thus when people on land looked at this ship, they would just see its rear (unwanted, “unfriendly” side) – not its front/face.

<sup>3</sup> They were called the *‘Am Ha’arets* (עַם-הָאָרֶץ) i.e. *people of the earth/land/lowliness*, as opposed to the *Hävērîm* (חֲבֵרִים) *associates*, i.e. those few who kept the Law in strictest fashion (cf. Bailey, *ibid*:148).

<sup>4</sup> That was called “midrash-uncleanness” (cf. Mishna Hagigah 2:7, Danby, 214 apud Bailey, *ibid*:148).

<sup>5</sup> cf. Bailey (*ibid*:150)

<sup>6</sup> A good way of translating ἢ καὶ (Cf. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 432). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

<sup>7</sup> Bock, D. L. (1994). [Luke](#) (Lk 18:9). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>8</sup> Bock (1994)

<sup>9</sup> Bock (1994)

<sup>10</sup> My adaptation of the words of Bock (1994)

<sup>11</sup> cf. Lv 25:29; Nm 39:7 and Bailey (*ibid*:152)

And, according to custom, he was supposed to give tithes only on his agricultural products. But he boasted that he gave tithes on *everything* he has! (v.12b)<sup>12</sup>

Well, if this Pharisee had said all these things in a *silent* prayer it would already have been bad. But according to their custom, all indications are (that) he prayed *aloud!*<sup>13</sup>

In other words, in his self-righteousness and haughtiness, this Pharisee even abused this prayer-time to preach to the “less fortunate unwashed” around him.

Indeed, he must have thought by himself, “Man, let me give these filthy people a good chance to look at a ‘righteous man’ like myself. And while they look at me, I will ‘graciously’ offer them a few words of my good judgement as well as some instruction in righteousness.”<sup>14</sup>

My brother & sister, the Pharisee of our text saw himself as a righteous man living among unrighteous people – as a holy man living among unholy people. But this Pharisee forgot – perhaps it never even crossed his mind – that whatever holiness he had (if he had any), he only had by God’s grace! So, he took for himself the credit for his righteousness; yes, he became religiously proud!

Well, let’s gauge our own hearts! Don’t you & I, too, live as Christians in a secular culture!? Are we not, just like this Pharisee, believers amidst a sin-polluted world!?

So, let me ask: When you walk from your car to the grocery store and you hear some of the most vulgar words that, at times, fly off the lips of some people, what’s your reaction? Is your reaction perhaps the same as that of your saved-but-sinful pastor? Yes, is this the order of your thoughts...?

- Firstly shock, “Wow!” “How could these people use these words?”
- Secondly, you think, “What’s their upbringing!?” “How did they come to live such lives?”
- Thirdly, you become sad – and you may even express your sadness in prayer, “O God, I wish we could totally eradicate this sort of heart-attitude from society!”
- Fourthly, you even sense a bit of anger/bitterness in your heart – bitterness not just against satan, but even against these foul-mouths!
- Fifthly, you sense a sinful voice deep inside yourself saying, “Wow, I’m so glad I’m not like them!”
- Lastly (and here’s where you & I really tip over the edge), you walk on, feeling a sense of pride or one-upmanship!

Well, if these are your/my thoughts, then let’s remember that from him to whom much has been given, much will be required!

My brother & sister, I think I wouldn’t be wrong if I’d say that our New Zealand culture is so secular that a large number of the medical staff in our hospitals are agnostic or atheist!

So, what’s my attitude towards medical staff when I’m seen by a medical assessment team or doctor or nurses? Well, is it not this pressing desire to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them? Of course, in itself, there’s nothing wrong with that!

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<sup>12</sup> cf. Bailey (ibid:152)

<sup>13</sup> cf. Marshall (apud Bailey, ibid:149)

<sup>14</sup> My way of rendering the words of Bailey (ibid:149)

But here's where things get messy – when you/I bring the Gospel to them in clumsy way – in a Pharisaical way; a way of talking down to them; giving them the idea that we regard ourselves as holier than they.

You see, a few years ago, it happened that I had to be seen by an after-hours doctor at the hospital in Palmerston North. I cannot remember what my illness was, but, as part of his medical-assessment questions, this doctor asked me, “Does your illness make you feel like you have a hangover – yes, do you feel like you once felt when you woke up in the morning after having drunk too much the night before?”

Well, here's what I, in the space of milliseconds, thought about this doctor's question: “Doctor, you look like you're part of this country's God-less binge-drinking culture!” “And what's worse, Doctor, you assume that I'm part of this God-less culture!” “So, Doctor, I'm going to ‘give it to you!’” “Yes, in this very minute, I will fix you for God!” My brother & sister, these were more or less the thoughts flashing through my mind! As you can see, they're all very judgemental and condemning!

Guess how I then answered that doctor's question!

This is what I said, “Doctor, I don't know what a hangover feels like, for, you see, never in my life have I had too much alcohol, let alone being drunk!”

Of course, there's nothing wrong about having never been drunk – in fact, it's all good! But here's where sin comes in – i.e. in the way you say it; to whom you say it; with what intention you say it!

Well, I must have said these words with a holier-than-thou attitude – at least, that's the way this doctor seemed to have received my answer, for with a friendly-but-feisty smile he replied, “Hahaha, you just had to sneak that one in, didn't you!?”

You know what? I think my words did not bring that doctor anywhere nearer to God than what I assumed he was. If anything, I think my words came to him not unlike the words of the Pharisee's audible prayer by which he tried to, even under the prayer, teach the sinful tax collector how smart he (as Pharisee) was!

Dear brothers & sisters, I know we sometimes have only a few minutes in which we could bring the Gospel to unbelievers! So, in a way, I don't blame the Christian who wants to make the most of such little time! But here's one thing that will never work in evangelism or counselling – i.e. to come across as a holier-than-thou (prideful) Christian! By God's grace, we'd do so much better by using empathy and by “coming alongside” those whom we desire to impact with the Gospel message!

And, when it comes to reaching out to alcoholics, I guess the man who has been healed from alcohol addiction, and *then* became a pastor, *that man* might do a better job in reaching out!

So far re Point 1: “Pride.”

Here is a short Point 2...

## Humility

Sinner that he was, this tax collector certainly *knew* all eyes were on him who dared set foot on the temple grounds and then even had the audacity to pray to God!

So, *physically* he goes and stands far away from the rest, yet not because (like the Pharisee) he wants to keep himself aloof from others! No, he just feels himself unworthy. He knows he's a sinner – knows he's rejected by people – not right with God; tiny before God; would not even look up to heaven/God – as was the customary position in prayer!<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. 1 Tim 2:8 *I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling...* (Emphasis mine)

Thus, utterly aware of his need before God, this tax collector does what was custom in his days for people who suffered big sadness – with arms crossed, he beats on his chest. Remember, that’s exactly what some believers did at the foot of the cross when, totally awe-struck, they saw their Lord breathing out His last!<sup>16</sup>

Well, this tax collector, so aware of his need of God, beats his breast & prayed!  
His words are few!

You see, the *Pharisee’s* prayer had thirty-three words (in English – NIV).

But this *tax collector’s* prayer has only seven (in English – NIV).<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, you don’t need to be wordy when you crave for God’s forgiving love.

Only seven words: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”

Actually, a literal translation of his words, go: “God, make atonement<sup>18</sup> for me, a sinner!”  
“Yes, God, let the blood of the sacrificial lamb (Lamb) wash also my sins away!”

My brother & sister, you & I have been Christian for many years. Is this still your & my prayer, especially when we are daunted by the sight of sin in other people?

Here’s the last point...

### **Christ’s Message**

Referring to the Tax Collector, Jesus says (in v.14), *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other...*

You ask, “Why?”

Well, Jesus answers (in v.14b), *everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*

My brother & sister, what is it that commends a person to God?

Well, to say it plainly, “The best way up is down, and the quickest way down is to lift oneself up.”<sup>19</sup>

You see, the prayer God hears is the humble & sincere call for mercy.

So, please think with me: for whom is religious pride a real danger? For the unbeliever? For the atheist? No, for they’re not religious!

Indeed, religious pride is a real danger for the *religious* person – i.e. also for the Christian; indeed, for you & me! Yes, it’s a danger for every pious person – every person who (by God’s grace) lives with high moral standards; yes everyone who was fortunate enough to have been born into a good and Godly family where he/she received a good education and learned to live with good manners and be a good and law-abiding citizen – even better if you obey the *Law of God!!*

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with obeying the Law of God! In fact, the Bible commends it! Jesus says, “If you love Me, then you will obey My commandments!” So, living a high moral life is a good & commendable & God-honouring thing!

But here’s where it goes wrong: when you/I add pride to it!

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Lk 23:48 *When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.*

<sup>17</sup> In Greek, it’s only six words: Ὁ θεός, ἰλάσθητί μοι τῶ ἁμαρτωλῷ. And in Hebrew (closer to the Tax Collector’s mother tongue, which was Aramaic), also six: אֲנִי חַיִּים עַל-הַטָּעָה כְּמִנְיָ

<sup>18</sup> I agree with Bailey (ibid:145, 154) that ἰλάσθητί μοι (atone for me) differs from “have mercy on me,” which would have been ἐλέησόν με as the blind man asked Christ to do (cf. Lk 18:38).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bock (1996)

And the Bible is full of it – how God hates pride!<sup>20</sup>

You ask, “Pastor, what’s the antidote to pride?”

Well, there’s only one antidote to pride, i.e. that you & I will stop comparing ourselves with other sinners (yes, even with unbelievers), but rather with Christ!

You see, comparing yourself with Christ, will put things quickly in perspective, for, against His perfection, you/I (and whatever good works we have) simply diminish into nothingness!

Besides, by whom have you & I been made right with God? By ourselves? No! So, (as Paul says in Rm 3:27) there’s no room for boasting in your being-right-with-God!<sup>21</sup>

Again, as Paul says (Gal 6:14),<sup>22</sup> the only grounds for boasting is in Jesus Christ!<sup>23</sup>

A proud Christian is an oxymoron!

I pray that every time you & I see a sinner, we will also see ourselves against Christ’s perfection, and beg for His mercy & grace!

AMEN (2858 words excluding footnotes)

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g. Js 4:6 ***But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”***

Also cf. 1 Pet. 5:5; Cited from Prov. 3:34

<sup>21</sup> Rm 3:27-28 ***Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.***

<sup>22</sup> Gal 6:14 ***But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***

<sup>23</sup> My brother & sister, can a person who has survived a plane crash because, in the last minutes before departure (and without his asking), he was put on another plane – can such a person boast in his survival? No! For the fact that he now lives is not his own doing!

Well, in the same way can no Christian take pride in his salvation! That belongs to Christ!