

Trust

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Foundation

Bible passage : Luke 18.9-14

Jesus told this parable to people who “trusted in themselves”. We don’t often think about this aspect of trusting and we may end up just thinking badly of the Pharisee and end up being like him.

Children are naturally trusting (a fact that Jesus went on to mention in v17) but they can soon come to discover that some people betray trust, or see adults who find it difficult to trust, or be told that to succeed you need to trust yourself and walk over others. Jesus was speaking about something that looks different and yet boils down to trusting in ourselves rather than God.

The people Jesus was addressing were those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous”. In other words, they believed that they lived basically good lives keeping God’s commandments. They thought that other people were “sinners”, like the tax-collector in the parable, but they couldn’t grasp that they too were sinners. Therefore, they looked down on others, took pride in their own goodness and instead of looking to God for help they trusted in their own righteousness. Jesus’ verdict in the parable was that the Pharisee, who thought like this was not justified.

Justified

The words “righteous” (v9) and “justified” (v14) were legal terms but from different languages. A person was righteous if they kept the law and so would be “justified”, much like saying they were not guilty. This is why these words are used to explain the gospel; we are justified by faith (i.e. trust) in Christ, not by works of the law. (eg Rom 3.28 & Gal 2.16).

*The Pharisee and
The Tax Collector
James Tissot c..
1886-1894*



In other words, he thought he was innocent but was guilty. In contrast the tax-collector in the parable has no delusions about himself. He was despised by others because of the way he worked for the Roman occupiers and benefitted from it, but he also knew himself to be a sinner. Therefore he does not approach God by trusting in himself but by looking to God for mercy. Jesus’ verdict on this man, who knew himself to be guilty, was that in fact he went home justified - found not guilty.

Jesus does not spell out here the significance of this, but it is very much part of the gospel message and particularly explained in Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians. The message of the gospel is that we are justified by faith (that is trust) in Christ and not by doing things to keep God’s laws. This is why Jesus could go on to say in verse 17 that to enter the kingdom of God we must receive it like a child; in simple trust in Christ, rather than trusting in ourselves.



God wants people to show childlike faith, trusting in Jesus, rather than in ourselves or our goodness.