

TUTORIAL
1.45

The Pharisees rejected God's way

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **Mark 7:1-7, 14-23, Luke 18:9-14.**

Last time

When a crowd of thousands followed Jesus and His disciples across the lake, He fed them in a miraculous way - starting with a very small quantity of bread and fish. The people wanted to declare Him their king but He slipped away. Later that night, He came walking across the waves to the boat where the disciples were caught in a storm. The next morning, in response to the crowd who came back wanting more food, He declared that He is the Bread of Life...anyone who accepts what He offers will be given eternal life.

Jesus contrasted religious legalism with genuine faith

As we follow the Narrative and understand the message Jesus is bringing from God, one thing that stands out is how He targets the religious hypocrisy that is so entrenched among His people, the Jews. He condemns the religious legalism of those who lead that system in contrast with the genuine, humble, repentant faith that God wants from human beings. We'll see this first from an incident Mark records, then from a story, or parable, that Luke wrote down.

Mark tells how one day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law come from Jerusalem to see Jesus. (Mark 7:1-7) From their track record and the subsequent conversation, it seems very unlikely they've come wanting to learn from Him, to find out the truth. We've already heard in the Narrative how these religious leaders and so-called experts in the Law are consumed with trying to follow the letter of the Law God gave to Moses. They had created an elaborate religious system which they control, adding numerous other requirements on top of God's commandments and trying to impose them on the people. They're not around Jesus very long before something happens to surface the underlying error in their view of God and of themselves.

They notice that some of His disciples fail to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. Mark gives some background here, explaining that the Jews, and particularly the Pharisees, have very strict and elaborate rules governing the washing of hands, particularly before touching anything that goes in the mouth. These Pharisees and religious experts from Jerusalem challenge Jesus on this point, asking why His disciples don't follow these traditions. But Jesus clearly isn't interested in debating the finer points of doctrine or theology. In fact, He's not even particularly polite. He calls them a bunch of hypocrites. Of course, He's the one person qualified to make this evaluation of others because He can see their "hearts" - their thoughts and motivations. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah who talks about people who claim to honor God even though they prioritise other things...whose so-called worship is a farce because it's based on their own ideas about pleasing God.

Having called to the nearby crowd to come and listen, He continues to expand on His point. (Mark 7:14-23) He targets another whole area the religious experts are obsessed with - dietary laws - and dismisses it as foolish legalism. What we eat, when, how it's been prepared, by whom...those are not things that impact God's view of us. They don't make us good or evil.

What does betray our evil natures and condemns us before God is what comes out of our hearts - desires, attitudes, thoughts, words and actions. Even those who are able to keep all the edges tucked in, who seem like *nice*, respectable, even noble people...at the end of the day no one's heart is free of pride, selfishness and wrong motivations.

So Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of these religious leaders, but they just serve as an extreme example of the mistake that everyone in the crowd makes (including His disciples).

Indeed it's the mistake that most...no, **all**, humans fall into! We tell ourselves we're not really *that* bad. We find others who we consider worse than us and compare ourselves favourably to them. And those who have any notion of God, often comfort themselves with the thought that surely He'll do the same...He's reasonable, He can see that they're not as bad as so-and-so, definitely not evil like murderers or terrorists for instance! Surely at the end of the day the good they've done will outweigh any mistakes! But of course this is human thinking, part of the same mindset that produced the elaborate system of rituals and rules of orthodox Judaism (along with most other religions). It is what has made the word *Pharisee* synonymous with hypocrisy.

Jesus told a parable about a tax collector and a Pharisee

Jesus used many parables in His teaching. This, as we know, is the traditional English term for these brief stories that are fictional but not fanciful...they could well happen. Parables illustrate important truths, but the underlying message, and certainly its applications, are not always immediately obvious. Luke

records one (Luke 18:9-14) that vividly portrays the conceited, legalistic pride that God rejects, in contrast to the humble, repentant faith He's looking for.

Speaking one day to an audience of people He knows are self-righteous and dismissive of others who don't live up to their self-imposed religious standards, Jesus tells the following parable. Two men go to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, and the other is a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stands by himself and prays this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.' But the tax collector stands at a distance and is too fearful to lift his eyes to heaven as he prays. Instead, he hits chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.'

So how does God view the two contrasting players in this story Jesus told? There's no denying that the tax collector is a sinner...everyone knows what those guys do, what their lifestyle is like. Certainly God knows all about his sin. There's no doubt he's guilty, condemned to eternal punishment. But the point Jesus is making here is not who's the worst person. It's about who recognises their sin. And this tax collector does. He's crushed by the weight of it. He realises there's no way for him to avoid the consequences. He can't do anything to pay for his sin-debt. And so he throws himself on God's mercy. It's not as though his prayer itself *does* anything...but it's the kind of approach God is looking for. Someone knowing their desperate need and throwing themselves on His mercy...saying, "God, if you don't help me I've got nothing else. I'm dead meat."

The lifestyle of the Pharisee, in contrast, would no doubt have appeared pretty good. Super religious, doesn't swear or drink, gives to charity, a pillar of society. The kind people might say about, "If anyone's going to get into heaven, it will be that guy." But again, the point Jesus is making is that, at the end of the day, no matter how hard someone tries, they're still hopelessly short of God's perfect standard. There's a record kept of the Pharisee's sin as well...and every single entry, on its own, condemns him to eternal punishment.

Good-living religious people desperately need God's grace - need to have their sin-debt dealt with - just as much as any loser who society condemns. And so Jesus concludes the parable with the statement that, as these two men head home from the temple that day, it's the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who is *justified* - whose sin-debt God has cancelled and who is now acceptable according to God's righteous standard.





DISCUSSION POINTS

The Pharisees rejected God's way

1. Would you agree that our society doesn't think it's good to be overly religious, any more than it is to be a real "no-hoper"? So what are the things by which people are judged in our culture? Make a list of the positive and negative qualities by which individuals are accepted. Also consider whether that list would vary with different generations.
2. Do you think that a prayer is necessary for someone to be saved? If not, why not? If so, why? Also describe the elements you feel are needed. As much as possible support your perspective from the Narrative we've covered so far.
3. How would you answer someone who put forward an argument like this: if it's true that "good living" people and really bad people are just as condemned by their sin in God's eyes, then what point is there for someone in society to "do the right thing"? Doesn't it make good sense to just live as you like and then repent when you're old?



ACTIVITIES

The Pharisees rejected God's way

1. Write a version of the parable about the Pharisee and tax collector that is contextualized for our culture.