

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Special Messages
Text: Luke 18: 9 – 14
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The Pharisee and The Publican

The Federal Vision was spawned back in 2002 by a group of zealous Reformed pastors that included Doug Wilson, Rich Lusk, Jeff Meyers, and James Jordan. In actuality the Federal Vision traces its conception back to Norman Shepherd, one-time professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. After years of controversy Shepherd was finally dismissed from the faculty for his aberrant teaching on justification. What Shepherd tried to do was combined faith *and* works as the basis for justification—a complete denial of the Reformation’s understanding of *sola fide*. Over the years Shepherd and his followers have refined their position in order to make it *appear* orthodox. They do this by redefining *faith* as *faithful obedience*, also called *covenantal faithfulness*.¹ An example of this is seen in the way Federal Visionist Jeff Meyers handles the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. He begins by bringing into question the classical Lutheran (Reformational) understanding. “What’s ‘Lutheran’ about this parable? Be careful not to read too much into it. The verb justified here cannot bear the full weight of the Lutheran doctrine of Justification. Always remember that theological terms used in systematic and confessional theology are loaded with a great deal more than such words normally bear, (see Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*). When the terms ‘justification’ or ‘justify’ or ‘righteous’ (all have the same root) occur in the Bible they *never* mean everything that they mean in systematic theological contexts. The doctrine of ‘justification’ is built up from many different passages, even from the story of the Bible as a whole, so that when we hear the word ‘justification’ we think of the whole shebang. But you can’t dump all of that into each occurrence of one of these words in the Bible. Here in Luke 18 we learn that the Pharisee was not righteous (even though he thought he was) and the tax collector (TC) was righteous. The key is to understand what ‘righteous’ means. It does not refer to moral purity or conformity to a legal standard (the ‘Lutheran’ mistake). ‘Righteousness’ in the Bible means covenant faithfulness. A person is righteous when he does what the covenant requires of him. The Pharisee thinks he’s righteous but in fact is not; the tax collector does not claim to be righteous, but in fact he is. The TC goes back to his house ‘justified’ or ‘rectified,’ which in context means, ‘shown to be righteous.’ This text says nothing about God ‘imputing an alien righteousness’ to the TC. One has to read that into the passage. Jesus, rather, is exposing the fact that the Pharisees are not truly *faithful* to the covenant. The TC’s humble plea *fulfills* the terms of the covenant. The TC is faithful to the covenant, that is ‘righteous.’ His faithfulness to the covenant *is* his righteousness. This is why Jesus sums it all up with a call to humility. The covenant is faithfully fulfilled by those who humble themselves. The humble are justified. So I don’t understand how one can read into this passage a Lutheran doctrine of justification. Nothing is said about imputation. Nothing is said about an alien righteousness being needed. In fact, the notion of an alien righteousness being imputed to the TC hardly fits with the story. The TC’s righteousness is his humility. In other words, covenantal faithfulness (=righteousness) in this story means humility. When it says that the man is ‘justified’ it means that he has proven his genuine ‘righteousness’ (faithfulness to the covenant). To confess one’s sins and plead for mercy is righteous. It fulfills the terms of God’s covenant with Israel.”² How does Meyer’s exposition compare to the way this passage has been understood by other in the Reformation tradition?

I. *The Scene and the Characters*

Here again Jesus is surely telling a story from real life. The thing reads so vividly that it cannot be otherwise. It happened in the Temple Courts. There were four times of prayer—9 a.m., 12 midday, 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.; and the strict Jew was careful to observe each of them. To the Temple Courts went two men.³ Matthew Henry notes as well the scope of the parable.⁴ We are told (v. 9) who they were whom it was leveled at, and for whom it was calculated. He designed it for the conviction of some who *trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others*.

- A. A great conceit of themselves, and of their own goodness; they thought themselves as holy as they needed to be, and holier than all their neighbours, and such as might serve for examples to them all.
- B. They had a confidence in themselves before God, and not only had a high opinion of their own righteousness, but depended upon the merit of it, whenever they addressed God, as their plea: *They trusted in themselves as being righteous*; they thought they had made God their debtor, and might demand any thing from him.

- C. They despised others, and looked upon them with contempt, as not worthy to be compared with them. Now Christ by this parable would show such their folly, and that thereby they shut themselves out from acceptance with God. This is called a *parable*, though there be nothing of similitude in it; but it is rather a description of the different temper and language of those that *proudly justify themselves*, and those that *humbly condemn themselves*; and their different standing before God. It is matter of fact every day.

Here are both these addressing themselves to the duty of prayer at the same place and time (v. 10): *Two men went up into the temple* (for the temple stood upon a hill) *to pray*. The *Pharisee* and the *publican* both went *to the temple to pray*. The Pharisee, proud as he was, could not think himself above prayer; nor could the publican, humble as he was, think himself shut out from the benefit of it; but we have reason to think that these went with different views. 1. The Pharisee went *to the temple* to pray because it was a *public* place, more public than the corners of the streets, and therefore he should have many eyes upon him, who would applaud his devotion, which perhaps was more than was expected. The character Christ gave of the Pharisees, that *all their works they did to be seen of men*, gives us occasion for this suspicion. Note, Hypocrites keep up the external performances of religion only to *save* or *gain* credit. There are many whom we see *every day* at the temple, whom, it is to be feared, we shall not see in the great day at Christ's right hand. 2. The publican went to the temple because it was appointed to be a *house of prayer for all people*, Isaiah 56:7. The Pharisee came to the temple upon a *compliment*, the publican upon business; the Pharisee to make his appearance, the publican to make his request. Now God sees with what disposition and design we come to wait upon him in holy ordinances, and will judge of us accordingly.

- II. Here is the Pharisee's address to God (for a prayer I cannot call it): He *stood* and *prayed thus with himself* (v. 11, 12): *standing by himself he prayed thus*, so some read it; he was wholly intent upon himself, had nothing in his eye but *self*, his own praise, and not God's glory; or, standing in some conspicuous place, where he distinguished himself; or, *setting himself* with a great deal of state and formality, he prayed thus. Now that which he is here supposed to say is that which shows, Barclay notes "We note one thing straightaway about the Pharisee's goodness; it was negative. The things on which he congratulated himself were the things he did not do. Even his fasting and his tithes were really negative things because they consisted in giving things up. Now that is the reverse of true goodness."⁵

A. That he *trusted to himself that he was righteous*. The Pharisee is self-absorbed. "He glances at God but contemplates himself."⁶ A great many good things he said of himself, which we will suppose to be true. He was free from gross and scandalous sins; he was not an *extortioner*, not a usurer, not oppressive to debtors or tenants, but fair and kind to all that had dependence upon him. He was not *unjust* in any of his dealings; he did no man any wrong; he could say, as Samuel, *Whose ox or whose ass have I taken?* He was *no adulterer*; but had possessed his vessel in sanctification and honour. Yet this was not all: he *fasted twice in the week*, as an act partly of temperance, partly of devotion. The Pharisees and their disciples fasted twice a week, Monday and Thursday. Thus he glorified God with his body: yet that was not all; he *gave tithes of all that he possessed*, according to the law, and so glorified God with his worldly estate. Now all this was very well and commendable. Miserable is the condition of those who come short of the righteousness of this Pharisee: yet he was not accepted; and why was he not? (1.) His giving God thanks for this, though in itself a good thing, yet seems to be a mere formality. He does not say, *By the grace of God I am what I am*, as Paul did, but turns it off with a slight, *God, I thank thee*, which is intended but for a plausible introduction to a proud vainglorious ostentation of himself. (2.) He makes his boast of this, and dwells with delight upon this subject, as if all his business to the temple was to tell God Almighty how very good he was; and he is ready to say, with those hypocrites that we read of (Isaiah 58:3), *Wherefore have we fasted, and thou seest not?* (3.) He *trusted* to it as a righteousness, and not only mentioned it, but pleaded it, as if hereby he had merited at the hands of God, and made him his debtor. (4.) Here is not one word of prayer in all he saith. He went *up to the temple to pray*, but forgot his errand, was so full of himself and his own goodness that he thought he had need of nothing, no, not of the favour and grace of God, which, it would seem, he did not think worth asking.

B. That he *despised others*. (1.) He thought meanly of all mankind but himself: *I thank thee that I am not as other men are*. He speaks indefinitely, as if he were better than any. We may have reason to thank God that we are not as *some men* are, that are notoriously wicked and vile; but to speak at random thus, as if *we* only were good, and all besides us were reprobates, is to judge by wholesale. (2.) He thought meanly in a particular manner of this publican, whom he had left behind, it is probable, in the court of the Gentiles, and whose company he had fallen into as he came to the temple. He knew that he was a publican, and therefore very uncharitably concluded that he was an *extortioner*, *unjust*, and all that is naught. Suppose it had been so, and he had known it, what business had he to take notice of it? Could not he *say his prayers* (and that was all that the Pharisees did) without reproaching his neighbours? Or was this a part of his *God, I thank thee?* And was he as much pleased with the publican's badness as with his own goodness? There could not be a plainer evidence, not only of the want of humility and charity, but of reigning pride and malice, than this was.

- III. Here is the publican's address to God, which was the reverse of the Pharisee's, as full of *humility* and *humiliation* as his was of *pride* and *ostentation*; as full of *repentance* for sin, and *desire* towards God, as his was of *confidence* in *himself* and his own righteousness and sufficiency.

A. He expressed his repentance and humility in *what he did*; and his gesture, when he addressed himself to his devotions, was *expressive* of great seriousness and humility, and the proper clothing of a broken, penitent, and

obedient heart. (1.) He *stood afar off*. The Pharisee *stood*, but crowded up as high as he could, to the upper end of the court; the publican *kept at a distance* under a sense of his unworthiness to draw near to God, and perhaps for fear of offending the Pharisee, whom he observed to look scornfully upon him, and of disturbing his devotions. Hereby he owned that God might justly *behold him afar off*, and send him into a state of eternal distance from him, and that it was a great favour that God was pleased to admit him *thus nigh*. (2.) He *would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven*, much less his *hands*, as was usual in prayer. He did *lift up his heart* to God in the heavens, in *holy desires*, but, through prevailing shame and humiliation, he did not lift up his eyes in *holy confidence and courage*. His *iniquities are gone over his head, as a heavy burden*, so that he is *not able to look up*, Psalm 40: 12. The dejection of his looks is an indication of the dejection of his mind at the thought of sin. (3.) He *smote upon his breast*, in a holy indignation at himself for sin: “Thus would I smite this wicked heart of mine, the poisoned fountain out of which flow all the streams of sin, if I could come at it.” The sinner’s heart first smites him in a penitent rebuke, II Samuel 24:10. *David’s heart smote him*. Sinner, what hast thou done? And then he smites his heart with penitent remorse: *O wretched man that I am?* Ephraim is said to *smite upon his thigh*, Jeremiah 31:19. Great mourners are represented *tabouring upon their breasts*, Nahum 2: 7.⁷

- B. He expressed it *in what he said*. His prayer was *short*. Fear and shame hindered him from saying much; sighs and groans swallowed up his words; but what he said was to the purpose: *God, be merciful to me a sinner*. And blessed be God that we have this prayer upon record as an answered prayer, and that we are sure that he who prayed it went to his house justified; and so shall we, if we pray it, as he did, through Jesus Christ: “*God, be merciful to me a sinner*; the God of infinite mercy be merciful to me, for, if he be not, I am for ever undone, for ever miserable. God be merciful to me, for I have been cruel to myself.” (1.) He owns himself a *sinner* by nature, by practice, guilty before God. *Behold, I am vile, what shall I answer thee?* The Pharisee denies himself to be a *sinner*; none of his neighbours can charge him, and he sees no reason to charge himself, with any thing amiss; *he is clean, he is pure from sin*. But the publican gives himself no other character than that of a sinner, a convicted criminal at God’s bar. (2.) He has no dependence but upon the *mercy of God*, that, and that only, he relies upon. The Pharisee had insisted upon the *merit* of his fastings and tithes; but the poor publican disclaims all thought of merit, and flies to mercy as his city of refuge, and takes hold of the horn of that altar. “Justice condemns me; nothing will save me but mercy, mercy.” (3.) He earnestly prays for the benefit of that mercy: “*O God, be merciful, be propitious, to me*; forgive my sins; be reconciled to me; take me into thy favour; receive me graciously; love me freely.” He comes as a beggar for an alms, when he is ready to perish for hunger. Probably he repeated this prayer with renewed affections, and perhaps said more to the same purport, made a particular confession of his sins, and mentioned the particular mercies he wanted, and waited upon God for; but still this was the burden of the song: *God, be merciful to me a sinner*.

CONCLUSION: Here is the publican’s *acceptance with God*. We have seen how differently these two addressed themselves to God; it is now worth while to enquire how they sped. There were those who would cry up the Pharisee, by whom he would go to his house applauded, and who would look with contempt upon this sneaking whining publican. But our Lord Jesus, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secret is hid, who is perfectly acquainted with all proceedings in the court of heaven, assures us that this poor, penitent, broken-hearted publican *went to his house justified, rather than the other*. The Pharisee thought that if one of them must be justified, and not the other, certainly it must be he rather than the publican. “No,” saith Christ, “*I tell you*, I affirm it with the utmost assurance, and declare it to you with the utmost concern, *I tell you*, it is the publican rather than the Pharisee.” The proud Pharisee goes away, rejected of God; his thanksgivings are so far from being accepted that they are an *abomination*; he is *not justified*, his sins are not pardoned, nor is he delivered from condemnation: he is not accepted as righteous in God’s sight, because he is so righteous in his own sight; but the publican, upon this humble address to Heaven, obtains the remission of his sins, and he whom the Pharisee would not set *with the dogs of his flock* God sets with the *children of his family*. It is a serious error to read into this text *any* notion of *covenantal faithfulness* as the ground of the publican’s acceptance with God. The publican certainly didn’t see himself as being covenantally faithful—nor did those who heard Jesus tell this parable. “God had bestowed” wrote Jeremias, “his favour on him, and not on the other! Such a conclusion must have come as a complete surprise to its hearers. It was beyond the capacity of any of them to imagine. What fault had the Pharisee committed, and what had the publican done by way of reparation? Leaving v. 14b out of consideration, Jesus does not go into this question. He simply says: That is God’s decision. He does, however, give us an indirect explanation of God’s apparent injustice. The prayer of the publican is a quotation: he uses the opening words of Ps. 51, only adding (with an adversative sense) *to hamartōlō*, ‘My God, have mercy on me, although I am such a sinner’ (v. 13). But we find in the same psalm: ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise’ (v. 19). The character of God, says Jesus, is such as is described in Psalm 51. He welcomes the despairing, hopeless sinner, and rejects the self-righteous. He is the God of the despairing, and for the broken heart his mercy is boundless. That is what God is like, and that is how he is now acting through me.”⁸ Meyers and those in the Federal Vision have distorted *sola fide* by defining saving faith as *faithful obedience/covenantal faithfulness*. In their scheme God actually justifies the godly—this is contrary to the Reformation, as Venema points out: “What distinguishes the Protestant view is that it insists upon the radical truth of the justification of *the ungodly*. Any attempt to ascribe merit to human works of obedience to the *law* of God can only transmute the doctrine of justification into a justification of *the godly*. Furthermore, unless the basis for the free justification of believers is found in Christ alone, the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God can only be undermined. Only the free justification of the ungodly upon the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone can provide a sure basis of confidence before God. Any contemporary formulation of the doctrine of justification must face the same questions that the Reformers faced; namely, are believers justified by grace alone on the basis of the work of Christ alone? And, can anything other than a ringing endorsement of

free justification secure the believer's confidence of acceptance and forgiveness with God?"⁹ Calvin captures the true meaning of the parable when he observed: "This verse teaches clearly what it really is to be justified—to stand before God as if we were righteous. For the publican was not said to be justified because he had suddenly acquired some new quality but because he was received into grace by the cancelling of his guilt and the blotting out of his sins. And from this it follows that righteousness consists in the forgiveness of sins. Because just as the Pharisee's virtues were stinking and polluted with depraved confidence, so that his laudable goodness before men counted for nothing with God, so the publican obtained righteousness by no help of the merits of his works but only by his prayer for pardon. Indeed, his hope was only in the pure mercy of God. But it seems absurd to force all into one rank, when the purity of the saints is very different from that of the publican. I reply that however much a man may advance in the worship of God and in true holiness, yet if he considers how far short he falls, he will be unable to pray in any other way than by beginning with confession of guilt. Some may be more, others less, but all in common are guilty. Wherefore Christ is without doubt laying down a law for all, as if He said that God is appeased only when we cease to trust in our works and pray to be reconciled freely. And even the Papists are forced to confess this to some degree, although they soon adulterate the doctrine with their depraved invention. They concede that all need the remedy of pardon, since none is perfect; but in the first place they make poor souls drunken with a trust in what they call partial righteousness, and then they tack on satisfactions to blot out their guilt. But the one foundation of our faith is that God accepts us, not because we deserve it, but because He does not impute our sins."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ I have addressed the errors of Shepherd and The Federal Vision in detail in the sermon series on Romans, particularly numbers 17 – 25.
- ² This has been posted by Wes White
<http://www.weswhite.net/2010/12/jeffrey-meyers-qualifies-his-exposition-of-the-parable-o...>
- ³ Wm. Barclay, *And Jesus Said: A Handbook on The Parables of Jesus* (The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 99.
- ⁴ *Matthew Henry's Commentary V* (rpt. Revell, 1962), p. 775. The major features of this outline have been adapted from Henry's Exposition.
- ⁵ Barclay, op. cit. p. 102.
- ⁶ Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 452.
- ⁷ Thomas Goodwin comments on the nature of assurance and the publican are worthy emphasizing: "Let us look on the poor publican, and let us consider his estate, which Christ there approves, and we shall find it to have faith in it, and yet not assurance, Luke xviii. The Pharisee he had an assurance that his estate was good, built upon himself; for, ver. 9, Christ's scope was to discover their presumption that trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and to this end tells them of a poor publican that indeed comes into God's presence, but it is at a distance: 'he stood afar off.' Had he had assurance, it would have encouraged him to have drawn near with boldness: Hebrews x. 22, 'Let us draw near with full assurance of faith.' But, on the contrary, he was so much cast down with shame, that he could not lift up his eyes to heaven, and yet he lifts up an eye of faith: 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.' He flies out of himself, and hath recourse to God's mercy, which, by all his carriage, and the opposition made, he had no assurance of. The presumptuous Pharisee could do nothing but give thanks, his assurance was so great. This man in an humble prayer begs that mercy that he yet wanted in his own sense, and yet Christ pronounceth the state of this man justified: ver. 14, 'I tell you,' saith Christ (and I promise you I will believe him), 'that this man went to this house justified, rather than the other.' He was then certainly justified, and therefore out of his example he makes this promise to such as are truly in his condition, that 'they shall be exalted,' in the same verse." *The Works of Thomas Goodwin VIII* (rpt. Tanski, 1996), p. 340.
- ⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Macmillian, 1972), p. 144.
- ⁹ Cornelius Venema, "Justification: The Ecumenical, Biblical and Theological Dimensions of Current Debates" in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A.T.B. McGowan (IVP, 2006), p. 326.
- ¹⁰ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries Vol. II* (Eerdmans, 1971), p. 130.