

Stories of the Master

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SM055 Two Men in the Temple

When Jesus told stories he often used characters in his stories that were unlikely heroes. Although shepherds and sheep were common in Israel, shepherds were looked down upon as unclean. But when Jesus told the story of the lost lamb, the shepherd heroically sought and saved his precious sheep.

Samaritans were despised by the Jewish people as heretics, unfaithful to the true God. But when Jesus told the story of a man who rescued another man from certain death, the hero turned out to be a Samaritan!

Women were looked down upon in that time. In some cultures, they were little more than property. In a Jewish court of law, their testimony was not accepted. But Jesus told stories where women emerged as the heroines. In the story of the lost coin, a woman diligently sought for her coin until she found it. She became an example of a loving God who diligently sought for his lost people.

One day, Jesus was having a conversation with his disciples and some Pharisees. Their hearts were troubled as he spoke of the coming judgment upon his people unless they repented. To encourage them, Jesus told the story of a wicked judge who cared not for God or people. He ruled by bribes and whatever he thought was best for him. When a widow came to him for justice, he cared not that her rights were being trampled upon by those who had power and wealth. But the widow persisted. She would not let the judge rest. She gave the judge no peace until finally, to rid himself of her nagging complaint, he ruled in her favor.

Jesus used this story to encourage God's people to pray, to pray persistently, not to lose heart, and to trust in God. If an unjust judge would grant the widow's plea, how much more would a just and loving God hear the prayers of his people.

When Jesus finished this story, the Pharisees started laughing among themselves.

"There he goes again, telling another story about some weak person, some unworthy person being the hero. To make this woman the hero in the story is foolishness."

One of them turned to Jesus and said,

"Jesus, when are you going to tell a story about a Pharisee. We have been faithful to God for hundreds of years. When our fathers were threatened by the wicked Hasmonean rulers, when our fathers had had enough of their compromise with paganism, they separated from them to follow God's Law.

"Our fathers have stood for the purity of Israel. We have opposed the Romans, and if God gave us a leader with a sword, we would follow him into battle to drive the Romans out. We could establish God's kingdom in our land and would lead the people into keeping the Law of God. Our fathers and we have studied the Laws of Moses with the greatest devotion. We have created practices to cover every part of life so that we will not transgress the Laws of Moses in any way.

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“We do not cheat, we do not lie, we do not commit adultery. We pray at the appointed hours, we fast and pray for God’s kingdom to come, we tithe from our income. We are the glue of this country. We are the ones who hold it together by our righteousness. Without us, our country would fall. Without us, our country would be judged by God. Yet you never tell a story about us and all that we have done for this land.”

Jesus looked upon the men with great sadness in his heart. He loved the Pharisees as much as he loved the widows, the shepherds, the Samaritans, the weak, the sick, and the despised. Jesus loved all, and he wanted all to know the power of God’s kingdom, but these Pharisees, these religious rulers were blind to what mattered most to God. And so, to reach their hearts, Jesus told a story about two men in the temple, a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector, but as shall see, it was not the kind of story they wanted to hear. It was a story to awaken them to the spiritual danger that they and others like them faced.

With sadness in his voice, Jesus said, “All right. I will tell you a story about a Pharisee.”

It was early in the morning in Jerusalem, and the morning sacrifice would soon be offered. The massive temple gates swung open and the priests, from their assigned positions, sounded forth on their silver trumpets, one blast, two blasts, three blasts of the trumpet, and the city awakened to a new day given by the creator of the heavens and the earth.

The sun rose over the horizon, and the priests rushed about the Temple grounds to fulfill their assigned duties. They had been up and busy for some time already. They had already been summoned by the high priest, had washed, and presented themselves in the Hall of Polished Stones where their duties were assigned. Lots were cast and responsibilities divided among them. Some would be chosen to sacrifice the lamb upon the altar. One would be chosen to fill the lampstand with fresh oil for its continual burning. Another would be chosen to offer incense upon the altar, a symbol of the prayers of God’s people.

As the priests went about their duties to prepare for the morning sacrifice and prayers, the people streamed into the temple. Men and women and even foreigners would enter. The foreigners would take their position in the outermost courts for no non-Jewish person could enter the inner court. The women would go in further to the Court of Women, but there they would stop for only Jewish men could enter the innermost courts to see the morning sacrifice and to watch the priest as he took the incense into the Holy Place and burned it before God. Still they came – by the tens, by the twenties, by the hundreds and the courts filled with worshippers of God. But on this day, God had his eyes upon two in the temple.

One was a Pharisee. He was a devout man. He had been trained in the academies of Jerusalem under the wisest rabbis. He knew the Laws of Moses and the traditions of the elders as well as any other man. But it is not just knowledge that characterized this man. This man practiced what he heard. He was full of zeal for the laws and the traditions. Did Moses say that God’s people were to fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement? He would do more than that. This man fasted twice a week! Did Moses say that God’s people were to tithe from their grain, their wine, and their oil? He would tithe on everything he gained. Were other people in the land unjust, swindlers, and cheating on their

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wives? He would never indulge in such sinful behavior. He would hold to the laws of God and the traditions of the elders with all his strength, and he would make sure that others knew it. As he entered the temple, he walked slowly with great dignity and held his head high for all his faithfulness and for all his accomplishments for God.

God had his eyes on another man who entered the temple that day. He was . . . a tax collector. Yes, a tax collector was entering the temple. Tax collecting is a hard life. It is a risky business. This man knew about it all and the strain of this life had taken its toll upon him. The Romans required him to pay the taxes of the people up front, and then he would be forced to go into a district to collect the taxes from the people. The people dreaded to see this man. They despised him for taking their hard-earned wealth and giving it to their pagan oppressors.

Some tax collectors were abusive and harsh in taking the taxes from the people. Some tax collectors were wealthy and because of their wealth the people would suspect dishonesty and would despise them even more. But some tax collectors would barely be able to make a living, especially the ones who were honest. But that did not matter. All tax collectors were despised by the people, and as this tax collector entered the temple, he entered hurriedly, hoping no one would see him. He kept his head down and his face covered as much as could, hoping that no one would notice him.

But as he entered with his head down, he accidentally bumped into someone. He immediately lifted his head and was about to ask for forgiveness when he saw that he bumped into the Pharisee. The eyes of the Pharisee and the tax collector met. The tax collector was filled with fear for the Pharisee could demand that this unclean, selfish, swindling man be removed to the eastern gate where all unclean people would have to stand. The Pharisee was filled with disgust for he had touched one who was unclean. He had touched one who cared not for the traditions of his people. He had touched one who was serving the hated Romans.

But the Pharisee said nothing, and the tax collector hurried on into the Temple for the morning sacrifice and the prayers. Finally, all was ready, the foreigners were in the Court of the Gentiles, the women were in the court of the women, and the men were standing and watching in the innermost court as a priest cut the throat of a lamb and placed parts of its body upon the altar of sacrifice. The aroma of its sweet meat soon filled the Temple Courts, and the people trusted that this lamb would take away the sins they had committed.

Then another priest stepped forward, a priest already chosen by lot early in the morning. He stepped forward with incense and the announcement was made that the incense would be taken into the Holy Place by the priest, placed upon the altar where it would burn and where its smoke would rise as a picture of the prayers of God's people.

When the priest entered the Holy Place, all the people knew it was time to pray. Some men knelt. Some prostrated themselves fully before God. Others stood with hands lifted to heaven. And the Pharisee? He stood, and looked at the people and looked at his surroundings, the beautiful temple that his people had built for God. He took pride in his place of worship. He took pride in who his people were. He took pride in his position as one of the religious leaders. He took a few steps to separate himself from everyone. He looked to his left, there a few men lay on their faces before God.

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He looked behind him and some stood with hands lifted to heaven. Then, he looked to his right and there was the tax collector, head bowed and praying fervently to God!

The Pharisee looked with disgust upon this man who had betrayed and cheated his people and then he opened his mouth and said, “O God, I thank you that I am not like these people who surround me today. So many of them are swindlers. So many of them are unjust. So many of them commit adultery. They all break your law. I thank you that I am not like them, and I thank you that I am not like this ... this tax collector standing next to me.”

When the Pharisee said the word “tax-collector”, the tax collector stopped his praying. He bowed his head even lower. It seemed that he was being crushed under the weight of all his sins. As he heard the Pharisee mention him with disgust in his voice, his shoulders began to shake and he began to weep, but the Pharisee was unmoved by this. The Pharisee turned away from such filth and lifted his eyes to heaven and said, “O God, you know all that I do for you. Your law asks me to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement, but I fast twice a week. Your law demands that I tithe on wine, oil, and the harvest, but you know that I tithe on everything that I earn.”

The Pharisee started to say more, “O God, you know that I ...” but he could not finish his sentence for a great cry sounded out from a man who stood nearby. It was the tax collector. The tax collector had fallen to his knees, he would not even lift his face to heaven, he crossed his arms over his chest, and then, he began to pound violently upon his chest as he said, “O God! O God! Have mercy upon me. Have mercy upon me. May this sacrifice offered today in this court be a sacrifice for me, the sinner.”

Jesus paused. He took a sip from his cup on the table. He looked at his disciples. He looked at the Pharisees, but they refused to make eye contact with him. Then Jesus said, “You wanted a story about a Pharisee, and I have given you one. Two men went up to the temple to pray – a Pharisee and a tax collector. But I tell you that when these two men went down from the Temple, the tax collector went home a justified man, and the Pharisee went home a guilty man. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Interlude

Two men in the temple – a Pharisee and a tax collector. What does this story mean for us? Jesus has told us. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Pride is the killer of people. It was pride that started our downward spiral into sin and darkness, the darkness in which the world finds itself now. Our first parents were placed in a beautiful garden. They were given everything they needed. They had each other. They had the promise of bearing children. They were given the task of making the world beautiful, ordered, and a place of peace and joy for all and a place of worship for God. There was only one thing our first parents were forbidden to do. They must not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree was in the middle of the Garden. Being in the center, it was a daily reminder that though God had given them many gifts and much power, they were not the center of life. They were not in control. They were not in charge. God was. God was the ultimate authority. God was in control. God was the one

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who set the standards and the boundaries for what was right and what was wrong. God was to be at the center.

But the tempter came to them and said, “Did God tell you not to eat from the tree? Here’s why God told you that. God knows that when you eat from that tree you will become like him. He doesn’t want you to be like him. He doesn’t want to share his power with you. God is keeping you from something special. Here, eat it and taste how sweet it is. Eat and become wise. Eat and become like God himself.”

It was pride that tempted our first parents. It was pride that brought death into the world, and such pride has been showing itself a thousand ways since in the lives of every man and woman on this beautiful earth God has given us.

One of the greatest forms of pride is religion. Religion is man’s effort to find God. In one sense, that is good. God has placed us on this earth in our families and cultures and nations that we might seek for him and find him. But religion soon becomes less about seeking for the one true God and more about showing others how great we are, how good we are, how righteous we are, when none of us is great, none of us is good, none of us is righteous.

In ancient Israel, God gave the Law to Moses. These laws were the gifts of God to protect his people from the practices of ancient nations that brought darkness and destruction to many. They set a boundary around his people to protect them from diseases, diseases of the body and diseases of the spirit. But God’s ancient people did not keep these laws. They sinned greatly and became more like the nations of the world with their evil. God judged his people. He sent them into exile and for 70 years they lived in a foreign land. At the end of 70 years they returned to their land, and this time they were determined to keep the Laws of Moses.

But another terrible thing happened. They began to see the Laws of Moses as the way to become righteous before God. They took the Laws of Moses and added to them. They made rules and traditions for every part of life. It was impossible for the common man, the common woman even to know all the rules, let alone keep them. Some of the people of God studied the rules with great fervor. They studied them, they practiced them, and they boasted in them. Such was the Pharisee in the story Jesus told. He was not content to fast one day a year. He fasted twice a week! He was not content to tithe from his grain, wine, and oil, he tithed from everything! He went above and beyond the teaching of the Law of Moses, and as he did so, he thought he was better than everyone else. He thought God was pleased with him. He thought God would surely count him as a son of the kingdom because he was such a religious man.

Then, there was the tax collector. He was despised by his people. He took money from his fellow Jews to pay the Romans or to pay Herod Antipas. Tax collectors sometimes had a hard time making a living. But some did quite well, and if a tax collector became wealthy he would be despised even more for the people would suspect him of cheating, swindling, stealing, and abusing the people to gain money for himself.

We do not know the personal history of the tax collector in the story. All we know is that he considered himself a terrible sinner, and he would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He beat upon his

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chest, something a man would do only in the most extreme of circumstances, and he asked God that the sacrifice that burned upon the altar would serve as a covering, as an atonement for his sins. The sacrifice of a lamb was prescribed in the Law of Moses as an atonement to bring forgiveness for the sins of the people, and this man asked that his sins be forgiven. He could not point to any merit in himself. He did not fast twice a week. He did not tithe from his money. He did not know the laws and the traditions like the Pharisee next to him. But he did know one thing – that God in heaven was merciful.

Friends, who are you like? Are you like the Pharisee, or, are you like the tax collector? Are you like the Pharisee who boasted in all his righteous deeds, who thought he was better than everyone else and who separated himself from all the common people because he thought they were unworthy. Or, are you like the tax collector who also separated himself from others because he felt so unworthy? He would not even lift his face toward heaven, he beat upon his chest and he cried out to God for mercy.

Two men went into the temple to pray. Who are you like? The Pharisee or the tax collector? Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.