

Luke: 18:9–17

From Catena Aurea:

9. And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10. Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a Publican.

11. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this Publican.

12. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

13. And the Publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

14. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

AUGUSTINE. (Serm. 115.) Since faith is not a gift of the proud but of the humble, our Lord proceeds to add a parable concerning humility and against pride.

THEOPHYLACT. Pride also beyond all other passions disturbs the mind of man. And hence the very frequent warnings against it. It is moreover a contempt of God; for when a man ascribes the good he doth to himself and not to God, what else is this but to deny God? For the sake then of those that so trust in themselves, that they will not ascribe the whole to God, and therefore despise others, He puts forth a parable, to shew that righteousness, although it may bring man up to God, yet if he is clothed with pride, casts him down to hell.

GREEK EXPOSITOR. (Asterius.) To be diligent in prayer was the lesson taught by our Lord in the parable of the widow and the judge, He now instructs us how we should direct our prayers to Him, in order that our prayers may not be fruitless. The Pharisee was condemned because he prayed heedlessly. As it follows, The Pharisee stood and prayed with himself.

THEOPHYLACT. It is said “standing,” to denote his haughty temper. For his very posture betokens his extreme pride.

BASIL. (in Esai. c. 2.) “He prayed with himself,” that is, not with God, his sin of pride sent him back into himself. It follows, God, I thank thee.

AUGUSTINE. (Serm. 115.) His fault was not that he gave God thanks, but that he asked for nothing further. Because thou art full and aboundest, thou hast no need to say, Forgive us our debts. What then must be his guilt who impiously fights against grace, when he is condemned who proudly gives thanks? Let those hear who say, “God has made me man, I made myself righteous. O worse and more hateful than the Pharisee, who proudly called himself righteous, yet gave thanks to God that he was so.

THEOPHYLACT. Observe the order of the Pharisee’s prayer. He first speaks of that which he had not, and then of that which he had. As it follows, That I am not as other men are.

AUGUSTINE. (ut sup.) He might at least have said, “as many men;” for what does he mean by “other men,” but all besides himself? “I am righteous, he says, the rest are sinners.”

AUGUSTINE. (ut sup.) See how he derives from the Publican near him a fresh occasion for pride. It follows, Or even as this Publican; as if he says, “I stand alone, he is one of the others.”

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. 2. de Pœn.) To despise the whole race of man was not enough for him; he must yet attack the Publican. He would have sinned, yet far less if he had spared the Publican, but now in one word he both assails the absent, and inflicts a wound on him who was present. (Hom. 3. in Matt.) To give thanks is not to heap reproaches on others. When thou returnest thanks to God, let Him be all in all to thee. Turn not thy thoughts to men, nor condemn thy neighbour.

BASIL. (ubi sup.) The difference between the proud man and the scorner is in the outward form alone. The one is engaged in reviling others, the other in presumptuously extolling himself.

CHRYSOSTOM. He who rails at others does much harm both to himself and others. First, those who hear him are rendered worse, for if sinners they are made glad in finding one as guilty as themselves, if righteous, they are exalted, being led by the sins of others to think more highly of themselves. Secondly, the body of the Church suffers; for those who hear him are not all content to blame the guilty only, but to fasten the reproach also on the Christian religion. Thirdly, the glory of God is evil spoken of; for as our well-doing makes the name of God to be glorified, so our sins cause it to be blasphemed. Fourthly, the

object of reproach is confounded and becomes more reckless and immoveable. Fifthly, the ruler is himself made liable to punishment for uttering things which are not seemly.

THEOPHYLACT. It becomes us not only to shun evil, but also to do good; and so after having said, I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, he adds something by way of contrast, I fast twice in a week. They called the week the Sabbath, (Sabbatho) from the last day of rest. The Pharisees fasted upon the second and fifth day. He therefore set fasting against the passion of adultery, for lust is born of luxury; but to the extortioners and usurists he opposed the payment of tithes; as it follows, I give tithes of all I possess; as if he says, So far am I from indulging in extortion or injuring, that I even give up what is my own.

AUGUSTINE. If you look into his words, you will find that he asked nothing of God. He goes up indeed to pray, but instead of asking God, praises himself, and even insults him that asked. The Publican, on the other hand, driven by his stricken conscience afar off, is by his piety brought near.

THEOPHYLACT. Although reported to have stood, the Publican yet differed from the Pharisee, both in his manner and his words, as well as in his having a contrite heart. For he feared to lift up his eyes to heaven, thinking unworthy of the heavenly vision those which had loved to gaze upon and wander after earthly things. He also smote his breast, striking it as it were because of the evil thoughts, and moreover rousing it as if asleep. And thus he sought only that God would be reconciled to him, as it follows, saying, God, be merciful.

CHRYSOSTOM. He heard the words, that I am not as the Publican. He was not angry, but pricked to the heart. The one uncovered the wound, the other seeks for its remedy. Let no one then ever put forth so cold an excuse as, I dare not, I am ashamed, I cannot open my mouth. The devils have that kind of fear. The devil would fain close against thee every door of access to God.

AUGUSTINE. (Serm. 115.) Why then marvel ye, whether God pardons, since He himself acknowledges it. The Publican stood afar off, yet drew near to God. And the Lord was nigh unto him, and heard him, For the Lord is on high, yet hath he regard to the lowly. He lifted not so much as his eyes to heaven; that he might be looked upon, he looked not himself. Conscience weighed him down, hope raised him up, he smote his own breast, he exacted judgment upon himself. Therefore did the Lord spare the penitent. Thou hast heard the accusation of the proud, thou hast heard the humble confession of the accused. Hear now the sentence of the Judge; Verily I say unto you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

CHRYSOSTOM. (de Inc. Dei Nat. Hom. 5.) This parable represents to us two chariots on the race course, each with two charioteers in it. In one of the chariots it places righteousness with pride, in the other sin and humility. You see the chariot of sin outstrip that of righteousness, not by its own strength but by the excellence of humility combined with it, but the other is defeated not by righteousness, but by the weight and swelling of pride. For as humility by its own elasticity rises above the weight of pride, and leaping up reaches to God, so pride by its great weight easily depresses righteousness. Although therefore thou art earnest and constant in well doing, yet thinkest thou mayest boast thyself, thou art altogether devoid of the fruits of prayer. But thou that bearest a thousand loads of guilt on thy conscience, and only thinkest this thing of thyself that thou art the lowest of all men, shalt gain much confidence before God. And He then goes on to assign the reason of His sentence. For every one who exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (in Ps. 142). The word humility has various meanings. There is the humility of virtue, as, A humble and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. (Ps. 51:17.) There is also a humility arising from sorrows, as, He has humbled my life upon the earth. (Ps. 142:3.) There is a humility derived from sin, and the pride and insatiability of riches. For can any thing be more low and debased than those who grovel in riches and power, and count them great things?

BASIL. (in Esai 2. 12.) In like manner it is possible to be honourably elated when your thoughts indeed are not lowly, but your mind by greatness of soul is lifted up towards virtue. This loftiness of mind is seen in a cheerfulness amidst sorrow; or a kind of noble dauntlessness in trouble; a contempt of earthly things, and a conversation in heaven. And this loftiness of mind seems to differ from that elevation which is engendered of pride, just as the stoutness of a well-regulated body differs from the swelling of the flesh which proceeds from dropsy.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. de Prof. Ev.) This inflation of pride can cast down even from heaven the man that taketh not warning, but humility can raise a man up from the lowest depth of guilt. The one saved the Publican before the Pharisee, and brought the thief into Paradise before the Apostles; the other entered even into the spiritual powers. But if humility though added to sin has made such rapid advances, as to pass by pride united to righteousness, how much swifter will be its course when you add to it righteousness? It will stand by the judgment-seat of God in the midst of the angels with great boldness. Moreover if pride joined to righteousness had power to depress it, unto what a hell will it thrust men when added to sin? This I say not that we should neglect righteousness, but that we should avoid pride.

THEOPHYLACT. But should any one perchance marvel that the Pharisee for uttering a few words in his own praise is condemned, while Job, though he poured forth many, is crowned, I answer, that the Pharisee

spoke these at the same time that he groundlessly accused others; but Job was compelled by an urgent necessity to enumerate his own virtues for the glory of God, that men might not fall away from the path of virtue.

18:15–17

15. And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

16. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.

17. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.

THEOPHYLACT. After what He had said, our Lord teaches us a lesson of humility by His own example; He does not turn away the little children who are brought to Him, but graciously receives them.

AUGUSTINE. (Serm. 115.) To whom are they brought to be touched, but to the Saviour? And as being the Saviour they are presented to Him to be saved, who came to save that which was lost. But with regard to these innocents, when were they lost? The Apostle says, By one man sin entered into the world. (Rom. 5:12.) Let then the little children come as the sick to a physician, the lost to their Redeemer.

AMBROSE. It may be thought strange by some that the disciples wished to prevent the little children from coming to our Lord, as it is said, when they saw it, they rebuked them. But we must understand in this either a mystery, or the effect of their love to Him. For they did it not from envy or harsh feeling towards the children, but they manifested a holy zeal in their Lord's service, that he might not be pressed by the crowds. Our own interest must be given up where an injury is threatened to God. But we may understand the mystery to be, that they desired the Jewish people to be first saved, of whom they were according to the flesh.

They knew indeed the mystery, that to both nations the call was to be made, (for they entreated for the Canaanitish woman,) but perhaps they were still ignorant of the order. It follows, But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children, &c. One age is not preferred to another, else it were hurtful to grow up. But why does He say that children are fitter for the kingdom of heaven? It is because they are ignorant of guile, are incapable of theft, dare not return a blow, are unconscious of lust, have no desire

for wealth, honours, or ambition. But to be ignorant of these things is not virtue, we must also despise them. For virtue consists not in our inability to sin, but in our unwillingness. Childhood then is not meant here, but that goodness which rivals the simplicity of childhood.

AMBROSE. Lastly, our Saviour expressed this when He said, Verily I say unto you, Whosoever will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, &c. What child were Christ's Apostles to imitate but Him of whom Esaias speaks, Unto us a Child is given? (Isai. 9:6.) Who when He was reviled, reviled not again. (1 Pet. 2.) So that there is in childhood a certain venerable antiquity, and in old age a childlike innocence.

BASIL. (in Reg. Brev. ad int. 217.) We shall receive the kingdom of God as a child if we are disposed towards our Lord's teaching as a child under instruction, never contradicting nor disputing with his masters, but trustfully and teachably imbibing learning.

THEOPHYLACT. The wise men of the Gentiles therefore who seek for wisdom in a mystery, which is the kingdom of God, and will not receive this without the evidence of logical proof, are rightly shut out from this kingdom.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

18:9 The Introduction

Finding Faith in the Publican.

Augustine: Does it not strike you when the Lord says in the Gospel, "When the Son of man comes, do you think he will find faith on earth?" Knowing that some would arrogantly attribute this faith to themselves, he immediately said, "To some who seemed to themselves to be just and despised others, he spoke this parable. Two men went up into the temple to pray: the one a Pharisee and the other a publican, etc." Letter 89.

18:10–13 The Parable

The Infirmary of Others is Not a Fit Subject for Praise for Those in Good Health.

Cyril of Alexandria: What profit is there in fasting twice in the week if it serves only as a pretext for ignorance and vanity and makes you proud, haughty and selfish? You tithe your possessions and boast

about it. In another way, you provoke God's anger by condemning and accusing other people because of this. You are puffed up, although not crowned by the divine decree for righteousness. On the contrary, you heap praises on yourself. He says, "I am not as the rest of humankind." Moderate yourself, O Pharisee. Put a door and lock on your tongue. You speak to God who knows all things. Wait for the decree of the judge. No one who is skilled in wrestling ever crowns himself. No one also receives the crown from himself but waits for the summons of the referee.... Lower your pride, because arrogance is accursed and hated by God. It is foreign to the mind that fears God. Christ even said, "Do not judge, and you shall not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned." One of his disciples also said, "There is one lawgiver and judge. Why then do you judge your neighbor?" No one who is in good health ridicules one who is sick for being laid up and bedridden. He is rather afraid, for perhaps he may become the victim of similar sufferings. A person in battle, because another has fallen, does not praise himself for having escaped from misfortune. The weakness of others is not a suitable subject for praise for those who are in health. Commentary on Luke, Homily 120.

The Dangers of Pride.

Martyrius: Whoever offers to God sacrifices of praise, the rational fruits of the lips that confess his name, should be very alert for the ambushes of the evil one. Satan lies in ambush ready to catch you by surprise at the very time of thanksgiving. He will get up and accuse you before God, just as he did with your fellow Pharisee in the temple. This time, he will not be puffing you up with pride over good works, as he did with the Pharisee, but he will be making you drunk with a different kind of pride. He makes you drunk on pride in the lovely and sweet sound of your own voice, the beauty of your chants that are sweeter than honey and the honey-comb. The result is that you do not realize that these belong to God, and not to yourself. Book of Perfection 78.

On Reporting One's Own Symptoms, Not Another's, to a Doctor.

Augustine: How useful and necessary a medicine is repentance! People who remember that they are only human will readily understand this. It is written, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ... The Pharisee was not rejoicing so much in his own clean bill of health as in comparing it with the diseases of others. He came to the doctor. It would have been more worthwhile to inform him by confession of the things that were wrong with himself instead of keeping his wounds secret and having the nerve to crow

over the scars of others. It is not surprising that the tax collector went away cured, since he had not been ashamed of showing where he felt pain. Sermon 351.1.

The Publican Receives Absolution.

Cyril of Alexandria: It says that the tax collector “stood afar off,” not even venturing to raise up his eyes. You see him abstaining from all boldness of speech. He seems devoid of the right to speak and beaten down by the scorn of conscience. He was afraid that God would see him, since he had been careless in keeping his laws and had led an unchaste and uncontrolled life. You also see that he accuses his own depravity by his external manner. The foolish Pharisee stood there bold and broad, lifting up his eyes without a qualm, bearing witness of himself and boastful. The other feels shame for his conduct. He is afraid of his judge. He beats his breast. He confesses his offenses. He shows his illness as to the Physician, and he prays that he will have mercy. What is the result? Let us hear what the judge says. He says, “This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.” Commentary on Luke, Homily 120.

It is More Difficult to Confess One’s Sins than One’s Righteousness.

Ephrem the Syrian: In the case of that Pharisee who was praying, the things he said were true. Since he was saying them out of pride and the tax collector was telling his sins with humility, the confession of sins of the last was more pleasing to God than the acknowledgment of the almsgiving of the first. It is more difficult to confess one’s sins than one’s righteousness. God looks on the one who carries a heavy burden. The tax collector therefore appeared to him to have had more to bear than the Pharisee had. He went down more justified than the Pharisee did, only because of the fact he was humble. If this Pharisee had been sinful, his prayer would have added iniquity to iniquity, but the Lord purified the tax collector of his iniquity. If just by praying, the Pharisee’s prayer provoked God’s wrath, then as a result of that provocation, the prayer of the tax collector proved all the more potent. Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron 15.24.

18:14 The Conclusion

Humility is the Mark of a Sinner.

Basil the Great: The stern Pharisee, who in his overweening pride not only boasted of himself but also discredited the tax collector in the presence of God, made his justice void by being guilty of pride. Instead

of the Pharisee, the tax collector went down justified, because he had given glory to God, the holy One. He did not dare lift his eyes but sought only to plead for mercy. He accused himself by his posture, by striking his breast, and by entertaining no other motive except propitiation. Be on your guard, therefore, and bear in mind this example of severe loss sustained through arrogance. The one guilty of insolent behavior suffered the loss of his justice and forfeited his reward by his bold self-reliance. He was judged inferior to a humble man and a sinner because in his self-exaltation he did not await the judgment of God but pronounced it himself. Never place yourself above anyone, not even great sinners. Humility often saves a sinner who has committed many terrible transgressions. On Humility.