

SUNDAY SCHOOL NOTES: 23 OCTOBER 2016

Juniors: Taking care of God's beautiful creation

Seniors: Our Attitude to God Luke 18:9-14

Although the ordinary people were glad to hear Jesus' stories, there were some who didn't come to learn but to catch Jesus out.

I suspect that, when they heard what Jesus was saying about prayer, these people congratulated themselves on the fact that they were not like the rest of the crowd. They didn't need to be taught about praying. They prided themselves on the fact that they observed the twice daily prayer times, repeating the ancient prayers perfectly. They regarded themselves as better than the rest of the crowd and regarded others as sinners who didn't observe the law as perfectly as they did.

So imagine their shock when Jesus told his next story!

Jesus described a scene during the hour of prayer at the temple in Jerusalem when two very different men went up to pray.

One of these men was a Pharisee, a member of the small set of Jews who aimed to keep every detail of God's laws and of the extra laws which teachers and scholars had added over the centuries. When the Pharisee went up to pray, he would have made certain that he did everything in accordance with the law – right time, right rituals, etc. He even took care not to stand too close to those with inferior standards.

The other man was a tax collector – a member of the most despised group of Jews. These tax collectors worked for the hated Roman rulers and supplemented their income quite legally by overcharging the people. They were regarded as failures because they worked on the Sabbath and because they mixed with non-Jews so often. The general Jewish consensus would be that God had no time for tax collectors. So when this man went up to pray, he dodged into a dark corner, out of sight of the people.

The prayers of these two men mirrored their lifestyles. The Pharisee's prayer sounded good – he thanked God that he was not one who disregarded the law. But notice: his prayer was actually a prayer of self-congratulation! In fact, it is almost as if he was reminding God how wonderful he was! He listed all his good deeds – how he wasn't a cheat or a thief or an adulterer, how he fasted far more often than God demanded, how he gave a tenth of his income to God. He came to praise himself, not to listen to God! He didn't even realise that no-one can keep God's law perfectly!

The tax collector knew that he had messed up where God was concerned. He knew that he had done all kinds of things which were unacceptable and he knew that he was a sinner. All he could say was "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Imagine everyone's surprise when Jesus explained that the tax collector was approaching God in the right attitude. The tax-collector knew God was holy; he knew that he had sinned and he knew that it was only by confessing his sin and trusting in God's mercy that he could even begin to pray. Jesus told the people that this was the attitude God was looking for. They were not wrong to feel sinful; they were not wrong to pray like the tax collector. In fact that was the better prayer!

The Pharisees and the other students of the law must have been shocked. A tax collector was more acceptable to God than they were!

It is very easy for those of us who come to church or Sunday School and who try to follow Jesus to make the same mistake as the Pharisee. We may be tempted to think we better than others are. In fact we, like everybody else, can never hope to live up to God's standards! No-one can ever be proud of himself or herself before God. We sin again and again – and when we pray we must remember that.

Even our best efforts to please God are failures. But when Jesus died on the cross, he wiped out our flops and our sins so that God sees only our attitude.

And we who know that should pray like the Tax collector, with confession and love and humility, thanking God for loving us despite everything we do all the time.