

# Stories from the Road #10

## Stories Jesus tells as he is on his way to die outside Jerusalem<sup>a</sup>

To some who were confident of their own righteousness<sup>b</sup> and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee<sup>c</sup> and the other a tax collector<sup>d</sup>. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week<sup>e</sup> and give a tenth of all I get<sup>f</sup>.’

<sup>13</sup>“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy<sup>g</sup> on me, a sinner<sup>h</sup>.’

<sup>14</sup>“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”  
(Luke 18:9-14)<sup>i</sup>

**Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from the passage?**

**Q. Which character in these stories do you most identify with?**

**Q. What question would you like to ask Jesus?**

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<sup>a</sup> Luke interviews eyewitnesses and writes his biography of Jesus to a particular person. “I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:4). In other words, he wants to add confirmation to what Theophilus already believes about Jesus.

<sup>b</sup> The words “justified” or “righteous” mean to be declared right or legally acceptable in meeting God’s requirements.

<sup>c</sup> In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were a conservative Jewish religious movement. They were very devout in following the requirements of the law (the 10 commandments etc), and were considered the good, moral, upright people in society – the pillars of the community.

<sup>d</sup> In Jesus’ day, tax collectors were considered to be traitors. This is because they collected taxes for the Romans (the Roman Empire occupied Palestine at the time). Tax collectors could also take a cut of what they collected.

<sup>e</sup> The Jewish law required fasting once a year, whereas the Pharisees fasted once a month.

<sup>f</sup> Tithing (the giving of 10%) even included products such as oil, seed and wine.

<sup>g</sup> In asking for “mercy”, the tax collector wants God to do something about his sin, rather than just overlook it. The “mercy seat” was in the tabernacle (The tabernacle was the portable version of the holy place – a precursor to the temple). The mercy seat was where the blood of the animal sacrifices was splattered, so that sin could be forgiven.

<sup>h</sup> A “sinner” doesn’t measure up to God’s requirements in their attitudes and actions.

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This story is from a collection of stories Jesus tells his followers on the road as he heads towards Jerusalem to die. Jesus is explaining what it will mean to follow him – and not just in a physical sense.

Jesus tells a story about whom it is that God accepts. It would have shocked and surprised Jesus' audience.

The first character in the story is a Pharisee. He is confident in his own right standing before God and looks down on others. Both these things are evident from his short speech. (Notice the number of times he says "I" and the way he denigrates the tax collector.) While he might be the moral pillar of the community – he is not the one whom God accepts (justifies).

The tax collector isn't confident before God (notice his words but also his manner before God). He doesn't bother comparing himself with others. He knows he is a sinner which means he has no right to claim or demand relationship with God. He asks God for mercy. He is the one whom God accepts.

Humility then starts with a realistic self-perception. The tax collector understood his true position before God – unlike the Pharisee – and so he depends on God for mercy. It is this dependence that is key.

Jesus goes on to say:

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>17</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:16-17)

Entry into the kingdom of God / being accepted by God depends on being like a child. Is it that children are humble? – Not necessarily, given how children at times like to brag. What the children and the tax collector both have in common is that they are dependent on someone else.

To those listening to Jesus, this is the sting in the tale: God accepts those who humble themselves, who are dependent on Him. Which means God won't accept them as they are, since they are confident in their own righteousness. Their impressive performance counts for nothing before God.

**Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from what you have just read?**

**Q. In what way has this story confirmed or challenged your understanding of Jesus?**

**Q. What do you want to take away and ponder further?**