

TCC Sunday 12th January 2014 – 2 Men, 2 Prayers, 2 Results – Luke 18v9-14

Title: “2 Men, 2 Prayers, 2 Results”

Purpose: To get people to stand back and think about self-righteousness in their own lives given we always assume that we are not like those nasty Pharisees!

Introduction

Pantomime season just ended

Well last Sunday marked the final performance of the 2013 Panto down in Newbury – “**Jack and the Beanstalk**”.

And as with all good pantomimes there would have been plenty of good old BOO and HISS with regard to one of the characters.

Well, today we come to a passage of Scripture which would have invited the very same BOO and HISS reaction from the audience.

In our story we do not have JACK and JILL but instead we have a PHARISEE and a TAX COLLECTOR.

The story that we are coming to today is **number 10 out of the 11 travel stories**, (unique to Luke’s gospel), that Jesus tells as he makes his way up to Jerusalem through the Samaritan territories.

And it is that one which we read there in Luke chapter 18 and verse 9 through to 14:

*** READ Luke 18v9-14 *** OPENSONG

Important first steps

Now coming to any passage of Scripture – there are a couple of very important first steps that we should always take. They are important precautions OR protections that we need to try and remember because if we slip up with either of these then we are likely to NOT get the correct understanding.

I’ll tell you what the steps are then give you a short description of each:

- STEP ONE – is what is called “Getting the ORIGINAL AUTHORIAL INTENT”
- STEP TWO – is called “Gauging the ORIGINAL AUDIENCE IMPACT”

So then #1:

1. Getting the ORIGINAL AUTHORIAL INTENT

Sound a bit grand doesn’t it – but actually it is something rather basic actually – it must mean making sure that whatever we think the passage means is in alignment with what the original author himself had in his mind when he spoke it or penned it.

Let me illustrate with a classic example of where people have fallen foul of this:

Paul writing in Romans 1v16 says: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for

the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

So people say (and maybe you have heard somebody preach this) – that word in the original Greek for power is “dunamis” and we have this in our own language “Dynamite” – Paul is saying that the Gospel is truly the Dynamite of God – the Gospel has truly “explosive” power.

Well it certainly sounds good – BUT (and you know there’s a “but” coming) – Dynamite did not exist in Paul’s day – and the word “dunamis” in the Greek never had the meaning of “explosive power” – yes it meant “power” or “ability” but not “explosive power” – therefore we can confidently say that the Apostle Paul did not have it in his mind, when he wrote this verse, that the gospel should be seen as something with EXPLOSIVE POWER.

Therefore – this passage CANNOT mean what it never meant back then.

So that’s the first little check or step that we take with a passage (am I reading something back into the passage from my situation that either could not or simply was not present in the original author’s mind).

So #1: Getting the ORIGINAL AUTHORIAL INTENT

#2:

2. Gauging the ORIGINAL AUDIENCE IMPACT

We spoke last week about the acronym ERA “E-R-A” which stood for 3 important things you do in a message: 1) Engage the mind 2) Reflect the emotion and 3) Apply the truth.

And this point about “Gauging the ORIGINAL AUDIENCE IMPACT” is all about taking note of the EMOTION that would originally have been there.

Now what I want to do - to try and illustrate this point a bit is to do another reading of this passage with a bit of, what you might call, PANTOMIME assistance.

So if I can have my helper – thankyou.

And don’t think you don’t have to be involved here – whenever you see the **BOO! HISS!!** banner – you need to respond with (yep you’ve got it) a BOO or a HISS.

And when you get a **AWW!-SHAME!!** sign – again you have to respond.

So as you can see this is going to be a DRAMATIC READING:

Two men (*point*)

went up to the temple to pray (*go on – put your hands together, look like your praying*),

One - a particularly **finely dressed, squeaky clean** and “**I’ve never done anything wrong**” PHARISEE (**BOO! HISS!!**)

and the other

a **sad looking, serious-minded, downtrodden, isolated** and **very lonely** TAX COLLECTOR. (**AWW! SHAME!!**)

NOW - The Pharisee (**BOO!-HISS!!**)

stood up and prayed about himself (**BOO!-HISS!!**)

: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector (**AWW! SHAME!!**).

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ (Ok – let’s hear it one more time **BOO!-HISS!!**)

BUT - The tax collector (**AWW! SHAME!!**)

stood at a distance (**AWW! SHAME!!**).

He would not even look up to heaven (**AWW! SHAME!!**),

but beat his breast (**AWW! SHAME!!**) and said,

‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ (Ok – let’s hear it one more time **AWW! SHAME!!**)

Recovering the shock factor

How important, especially when we are reading a parable, that we recover the emotion that was involved.

A parable without any emotional content is about as good as:

- a joke without a punchline OR
- a story without some plotline twist that will warrant some sort of eventual resolution

Our structure

Now at this point let me tell you the structure that I want to adopt for going through these few verses – I have just 3 points and they are:

- The 2 Men
- The 2 Prayers
- & The 2 Results

So, as you can see, a very simple sort of outline to take us through the parable.

#1 then:

#1 – THE 2 MEN

Now we know who our 2 men are – one a Pharisee, the other a Tax Collector:

- **The first one** who is intensely religious, impeccably upright and constantly concerned with the various duties of the Law (the Torah).
- **The other** is the total reverse of this – he would rarely be found in the house of God, instead he is busy selling himself out to the Romans to do their dirty work collecting taxes and lining his own pocket at the same time at the expense of his fellow-Jew.

Herein lies our problem

And herein lies a problem for us BECAUSE YOU SEE - we need to make sure that we attach the right set

of feelings against the right people.

Standing amongst the **original hearers of this parable:**

- when it came to the Pharisee he was someone they looked up to and a whole number of levels – intellectually, spiritually, by dint of their position in Jewish society – and this of course was why these Pharisees tended to get the top seats at the important meals and would expect to be widely greeted in the marketplaces.
- when it came to the Tax Collector – he was that dirty, filthy, godless traitor!! People were probably mumbling to themselves – “How dare he come in here – doesn’t he know that this is a house of prayer – you know a place where godly people come - *NOT* filthy scum bags like him”.

Maybe you remember Zacchaeus that chief tax collector in the next chapter – he couldn’t see Jesus because he was rather, how shall we say “vertically challenged” – I suspect it wasn’t just his shortness of stature that gave him a problem – I suspect that the rest of the Jewish crowd would have let him know in no uncertain terms that he was not welcome amongst them – they may well have spat on him if he came a bit too close!!

So these then are our 2 men and we need to correctly see the ORIGINAL AUDIENCE IMPACT – to know who they were CHEERING FOR and who they were BOOING otherwise this parable will *NOT* have any SHOCKING ELEMENT to it – instead we will find ourselves feeling very comfortable and SIMPLY AGREEING WITH IT.

So #1 – THE 2 MEN

Now #2:

#2 – THE 2 PRAYERS

The setting for the parable is given in Verse 10: “Two men went up to the temple to pray...”.

Most likely this would be a corporate worship service where there had been either the morning or the evening sacrifice of atonement offered and incense burned whilst the gathered congregation prayed and then they would receive the priestly benediction.

Pharisees Prayer

Let’s notice 3 things about the Pharisees prayer:

- FIRST – he prays in a category of one
Verse 11 says “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself...”
There is actually a second equally valid translation for this opening part of Verse 11 which I’ll read from the NKJV “The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus”

So given what we know of how superior the Pharisees were and how they like to avoid any sort of contamination from lesser plebs – I suspect this is the more likely of the two options.

- SECOND – his prayer is one of comparison – he compares himself favourably with all those who he would classify as “sinners” – those who are essentially *NOT LIKE HIM*.

And scanning his fellow worshippers he spies the Tax Collector – the epitome of everything he despises and hates.

- THIRDLY – he now reviews his own righteousness.
(If it was not enough to engage in an exercise of self-righteous back stabbing – he now engages in a self-congratulatory back-slapping exercise – no doubt to the tune of “for he’s a jolly good fellow”!!).

Verse 12 “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get”

The OT only prescribed one fast occasion in the year and that was on the day of atonement (Yom Kippur).

But we know from the Jewish writings that Pharisees would fast on Mondays and Thursdays – which if you do the simple math means that they fasted 100x as much as was asked of them.

Also when it came to tithing – they not only tithed their crops they also tithed every other little thing such as their garden herbs as well.

Tax Collectors Prayer

Let’s now make a few observations on the Tax Collectors prayer:

- FIRST OFF – he also puts himself in a category of one – Verse 13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance...”

He does not feel he is worthy to be part of the gathered congregation.

So where the Pharisee desires to be held up aloft – this man desires to be stay carefully aloof.

- SECONDLY – rather than beating his own drum, drums on his own chest – it was an expression of distress and grief – we see the man feels really desperate.
- THIRDLY – he does actually have a prayer to God – rather than just talking to and about himself – he has a petition: Verse 13 “God, have mercy on me a sinner”.

It’s important we see 2 things about this petition – the first is this word MERCY.

The normal word for mercy comes up about 75 times in the NT, but the word used here is a different one that by comparison is pretty rare – only comes half-a-dozen times and it is normally translated by the word propitious.

This is how one rather literal translation has it YLT “God be propitious to me—the sinner!”. Now this word propitious or propitiate is not one we use a lot – it simply means to turn God’s righteous anger away.

So he is not simply saying to God – please look upon all my misery and show compassion – have a little pity on a miserable wretch like me. It is rather him acknowledging the fact that in his sin he has deeply offended the all-holy and all-righteous God and as such prays that God’s anger might be dealt with.

A second thing is to notice that actually the verse does have the definite article before sinner – it is not merely “God be propitious to me – a sinner” – BUT “the sinner”.

Remember how Paul sees himself as the chief of sinners – 1 Tim 1v15 “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst”

Ok let’s get onto the last point – 1) The 2 Men, 2) The 2 Prayers and now #3:

#3 – THE 2 RESULTS

Now I really don’t want to say a whole load on this one since in a lot of ways the results are fairly self-evident.

The first man’s prayers do not really qualify as prayers at all – the Pharisee merely glances at God and then prays to and about himself!!

The Tax Collector prays from a place of brokenness and from a place where he feels the full force of his guiltiness before an all-holy God and prays for forgiveness for God’s rightful wrath and anger at his sin to be appeased and for him to be propitious and forgiving.

The result is that God hears the 2nd man and this is the one who goes home not merely satisfied by, as Verse 14 says “justified”.

This is a legal word – not a feeling word – it means that as God, as righteous judge, who has presided over his case has chosen to declare him acquitted – free to go – forgiven.

Ok so far so good – 2 men, 2 prayers, 2 results – BUT and here is the question:

Q. What does it all mean?

Q. What are we supposed to take away from this parable?

So by way of CONCLUSION – we will seek to answer really the most important question of all – and of course this is the A bit in **ERA** – Engage the mind; Reflect the emotion AND Apply the truth.

CONCLUSION

Now if you were a good upstanding Jew and you just heard Jesus’ parable – you would at this point be pretty shocked – even scandalized – that this tax collector fellow was the one who was acceptable and justified in God’s sight.

And it is pretty easy to see that this final punch line in Verse 14 is matched by the opening introduction there in Verse 9.

(Let me read it to you): “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:...”

Like a panto! Don't take it very seriously

Now I think there is an easy problem associated with this section of Scripture – that **rather like a Pantomime** – we don't really take it very seriously.

A great contrast

We see a great contrast in the characters – we have our villain of the piece (BOO! HISS!!) and we simply join in the chorus and we say to ourselves: “Yes what a nasty piece of work that Pharisee is – total hypocrite!!”.

And so all too easily we don't connect with the Pharisee.

When it comes to the Tax Collector we probably make the natural assumption that we are quite a lot like him in terms of the authenticity and genuineness of his devotion.

And hence again we probably all too easily connect with the good guy.

The theme and the thrust

Let's talk for a moment about THEME & THRUST:

- THE THEME of these 6 verses is that of PRAYER

However – that is only the theme, what is really key is what the particular THRUST is:

- SO THEN – THE THRUST is identified in Verse 9 and is all to do with self-righteousness. “To some who were confident of their own righteousness (i.e. they were righteous in their own eyes) and looked down on everybody else..”

Clearly the audience that Jesus told this parable to where not simply the Pharisees – it is a big mistake to assume that Jesus was, at this point, just targeting that select group of BIG LEAGUE HYPOCRITES.

Let me end with 2 parting headings:

- FIRST – Our dealings with others
- SECOND –God's dealings with us

1. FIRST – Our dealings with others

In summary (expanded in more detail in recording) – how do we deal with people that are simply very different from us – “not our sort of people”? This is one very useful way to make us stop and think about whether we are superior/self-righteous in our hearts.

2. SECOND –God's dealings with us

In summary (expanded in more detail in recording) – I read from the article below:

God's Preferential Option for the Poor

Catholic scholars coined the phrase “God’s preferential option for the poor” to describe a phenomenon they found throughout both the Old and New Testaments: God’s partiality toward the poor and the disadvantaged. *Why would God single out the poor for special attention over any other group?* I used to wonder. What makes the poor deserving of God’s concern? I received help on this issue from a writer names Monika Hellwig, who lists the following “advantages” to being poor:

1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.
2. The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another.
3. The poor rest their security not on things but on people.
4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their own importance, and no exaggerated need of privacy.
5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
7. The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience born of acknowledged dependence.
8. The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want.
9. When the poor have the Gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news and not like a threat or a scolding.
10. The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.

In summary, through no choice of their own—they may urgently wish otherwise—poor people find themselves in a posture that befits the grace of God. In their state of neediness, dependence, and dissatisfaction with life, they may welcome God’s free gift of love.

As an exercise I went back over Monika Hellwig’s list, substituting the word “rich” for “poor,” and changing each sentence to its opposite. “The rich do not know they are in urgent need of redemption....The rich rest their security not on people but on things....” (Jesus did something similar in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, but that portion gets much less attention: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort....”).

Next, I tried something far more threatening: I substituted the word “I.” Reviewing each of the ten statements, I asked myself if my own attitudes more resembled those of the poor or of the rich. Do I easily acknowledge my needs? Do I readily depend on God and on other people? Where does my security rest? Am I more likely to compete or cooperate? Can I distinguish between necessities and luxuries? Am I patient? Do the Beatitudes sound to me like good news or like a scolding?

As I did this exercise I began to realize why so many saints voluntarily submit to the discipline of poverty. Dependence, humility, simplicity, cooperation, and a sense of abandon are qualities greatly prized in the spiritual life, but extremely elusive for people who live in comfort. There may be other ways to God but, oh, they are hard—as hard as a

camel squeezing through the eye of a needle. In the Great Reversal of God's kingdom, prosperous saints are very rare.

I do not believe the poor to be more virtuous than anyone else (though I have found them more compassionate and often more generous), but they are less likely to *pretend* to be virtuous. They have not the arrogance of the middle class, who can skillfully disguise their problems under a facade of self-righteousness. They are more naturally dependent, because they have no choice; they must depend on others simply to survive. Christianity
Today Nov 13 1995

The point being that we need to see if God is truly having dealings with us or not.

The man in the story who went home justified clearly had had dealings with God – so what about us?

AMEN