

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Jesus Christ: The Core of Everything

Lesson: Luke 18:9-14

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

¹³ *"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 on me, a sinner.'*

¹⁴ *"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."*

(Slide 1) Friends, When you hear the word *Pharisee*, what kind of image or thought comes to your mind? Do you think of something positive or negative? Most of us probably think of negative images—hypocrites, legalists, self-righteous people, or those with a sense of privilege. That's right. For most of us, the word "Pharisee" brings to mind something negative rather than positive.

You've probably heard the phrase *the Good Samaritan*. But have you ever heard the phrase *the Good Pharisee*? It sounds unfamiliar and even awkward, doesn't it?

So, who were the Pharisees really? Were all Pharisees as bad as we often imagine?

About six hundred years before Jesus came to earth, Israel was defeated by Babylon and completely destroyed. The leaders, craftsmen, and religious figures of Israel were taken captive and lived in Babylon for seventy years. Babylon worshiped other gods, but among the captives were those who worked tirelessly to preserve their faith, identity, culture, and language. Although they had no place to worship, they read and reread *the Five Books of Moses* to keep their faith alive. Their desire to keep the law was an effort to hold on to their spiritual identity in a foreign land.

When the seventy years of captivity ended, they returned to Israel. And just as they had done in Babylon, they continued to live faithfully by keeping the law, striving to maintain their faith and identity as God's people.

Time passed, and when Jesus was born, Israel was under Roman rule. Empires usually try to control not only a nation's politics but also its language and culture. For example, when Korea was under Japanese rule for thirty-five years, Japan did not merely exploit Korea's resources—it tried to erase Korea's identity and culture. Koreans were forced to speak Japanese, to change their names to Japanese ones, and were forbidden to sing Korean songs or read Korean books.

When a nation faces that kind of oppression, people respond in different ways. Some resist with all their strength to preserve their language and culture for the next generation. Others surrender in despair and accept domination passively. Still others choose to cooperate with the ruling power for their own gain.

A similar situation occurred when Israel was under Roman rule. Rome wanted to fully control Israel—using only Roman coins, Latin in all official matters, and promoting Roman culture.

Now, back to our earlier question: Who were the Pharisees? The Pharisees were those who sought to preserve Israel's faith and identity by keeping God's law faithfully under Roman domination. They were teachers of Israel and were respected as people who spoke truthfully and lived righteously.

The Bible contains many stories of Jesus and the Pharisees in conflict, and sometimes the Pharisees are portrayed as Jesus' enemies. But not all Pharisees opposed Jesus. Some, like Nicodemus, sincerely respected Jesus and believed that he was the Son of God.

Then, who were the tax collectors? Rome continuously demanded heavy taxes from Israel. Those who worked for Rome and collected taxes from their own people to deliver to the empire were called tax collectors. They were seen as traitors and enemies of their own nation.

(Slide 2) With this background in mind, today's story might sound surprising. In Jesus' parable, two men go up to the temple to pray—one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee thanks God for his righteousness and looks down on others, while the tax collector stands at a distance, beats his chest, and asks God for mercy.

If we didn't know the background, we might easily think as we often do—that Pharisees are hypocrites and enemies of Jesus, while tax collectors are sinners but friends of Jesus. But in Jesus' time, people would have been shocked by this story,

because Pharisees were respected teachers, and tax collectors were despised and condemned.

So why did Jesus tell this story in such an unexpected way—portraying these two figures so differently from what people thought? Because Jesus wanted to teach a deeper truth.

Jesus was not saying that the Pharisee was evil or that the tax collector was good. What he wanted to show was this: even those who are respected and admired by others can be far from God if they lack humility and judge others. But those who are looked down upon and rejected by society can come near to God when they sincerely confess their sins, seek forgiveness, and decide to live a new life. That is where the kingdom of God begins.

(Slide 3) Today is **Reformation Sunday**, a day to remember the reforming spirit that began about five hundred years ago through Martin Luther.

What do you think is the true role of the Church? There are many—worship, fellowship, discipleship, and mission and service.

If the Church of five hundred years ago had centered its life on God and God's Word—worshiping with reverence, loving one another in Christ, following Jesus' example, and serving those in need—it would have been a beautiful church. But sadly, it was not so.

At that time, people were more focused on life after death than on how to follow Jesus in this life. Their faith became centered on sin and forgiveness. Of course, sin and forgiveness are very important parts of our faith. But instead of seeking forgiveness through Jesus Christ, people looked for easier ways. The Church took advantage of their fears and began selling indulgences—certificates that supposedly proved their sins were forgiven.

In response to this corruption, Luther proclaimed three foundational truths: *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *Sola Fide* (Faith alone), and *Sola Gratia* (Grace alone). Our faith must be deeply rooted in Scripture. Salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ—not by our own efforts, but by the grace of God alone.

Friends, let me ask you: what does the Church mean to you? With what kind of heart did you come here this morning, and with what kind of heart are you worshiping today?

Many churches, including ours, long for growth. When I first came here, one of the first things I heard was, “We want to grow.” I completely agree that church growth is important. But is that enough? If a church grows in number, does that automatically mean that its members grow closer to God, that their faith deepens, and that they follow Jesus more faithfully? Could it be that in our pursuit of growth, we are missing something essential?

So again, what does the Church mean to you? With what kind of heart did you come here today? When you woke up this morning, when you came to church, and even now—what is the most important thing that you must never forget?

It is Jesus Christ.

Only Jesus Christ saves us. Only Jesus Christ sets us free. The very essence and core of our faith is to believe in Jesus Christ rightly and to follow him.

When we lose the essence of our faith, even someone as respected as the Pharisee can be rejected by God. But even someone like the tax collector—despised by everyone—can be called righteous when he keeps God at the center of his life and holds on to the essence of faith.

When the Church loses its center in Jesus Christ, it is no longer the Church. It becomes an institution that used people’s fear and turned forgiveness into a business in Luther’s time.

Church growth and fellowship through coffee time are really important—but if Jesus Christ is not at the very center of our lives, then our faith might not be so different from that of the Pharisee in today’s story, or from the Church that Luther once challenged.

This morning, and in this very moment, may Jesus Christ dwell in your heart and in your life. May he walk with you, renew your spirit, and help you hold on to faith and God’s Word in this difficult world, where it is so easy to live just like everyone else. Jesus Christ—He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.