

PLAIN TRUTH®

inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

“Thank God
I’m not like...”

Avoiding Religious Pride

By Greg Albrecht

He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’”

“Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face on his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

Jesus commented: “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be

simply yourself, you will become more than yourself” (Luke 18:9-14, Eugene Peterson, *The Message Bible*).

The classical name of this, one of Jesus’ best-known parables, is “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.” As we consider how Jesus’ masterfully woven story might apply to our lives, one of the first steps we should take is to identify the original audience. To whom did Jesus address this parable and for what purpose? In this parable, those questions are answered by Luke before he quotes the parable given by Jesus.

As noted above, *The Message Bible* (Luke 18:9) translates Luke as saying Jesus told this story ... to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral

performance and looked down their noses at the common people. We’ll come back to that word “performance.”

In the first sentence of this parable, Jesus depicts two people going to the Temple to pray. The Jews in the original audience believed the Temple to be the most holy religious place in the world. We can safely assume before Jesus had finished the first sentence, the listeners would have concluded both men were engaged in a virtuous religious exercise. Then, in the second part of the sentence Jesus appears to make it easy for both his original audience, as well as all those who

would read the parable down through the centuries, to pinpoint the good guy and the bad guy.

Because we are familiar with the lesson of this parable, you and I know the roles that Jesus assigned the two main characters in this parable. But, had we been part of the original audience when Jesus introduced the characters, we would have immediately concluded the hero of the parable to be the Pharisee.

After one sentence the original audience surely determined the protagonist/good guy of Jesus’ parable to be the religious professional, the highly esteemed person who could always be seen doing all the right things and participating in all the right and appropriate religious rituals and

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ceremonies. Who in that original audience, after hearing the first sentence, didn't want to be like the Pharisee?

Identifying the bad guy—the villain—would also have been a no-brainer to the first century audience to whom Jesus originally gave this parable. Tax collectors were no-good, ruthless, greedy, immoral people who were authorized to demand and collect taxes and were commonly believed to skim a little profit off the top before turning in the money to the authorities. Who wanted to be like that guy?

The First Curve Ball

But Jesus turned the tables on his listeners, didn't he? The rest of the parable illustrates, through their respective prayers, **the person assumed to be the good guy was actually the bad guy**, and the one everyone automatically thought would be the bad guy was the good guy. Jesus never stops turning the tables of Christ-less religion. Jesus does not throw the "pitch" religion expects him to throw.

In this short story with a huge lesson, Jesus has both of these men going to the temple to pray and he summarizes their respective prayers. The Pharisee was an actor—he "posed and prayed," much like members of the Academy of Motion Pictures who attend their annual award ceremony.

Every year, usually in early March, the motion picture industry throws itself a party and presents awards to...its own members. The centerpiece of this annual ego orgy hosted by the Motion Picture Academy is a statue called an "Oscar," given to individuals anointed and proclaimed as "stars."

The Pharisee was widely acclaimed and hailed as a religious star. As an actor (and he was!), the Pharisee was at the top of his profession. He never missed a line. He positioned himself in a favorable way in public places. His performance was everything

Christ-less religion had written in its script. He delivered his lines flawlessly—his nailed his religious performance. The Pharisee showed up at the right time in the right place looking the way he should, saying what was expected. He was at his best when he was on the stage with everyone watching.

The Pharisee prayed, "Oh God, I thank you I am not like the other people." The Tax Collector prayed, "God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner."

A Pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself.—A.W. Tozer

Jesus depicts the Tax Collector as being acutely aware that he is not deserving of any Gold Stars in Sunday School. He knows full well he will not be receiving any award at the Religious Oscars and he knows no one wants to see him seated in the front row. So he slumps in the shadows of the Temple.

The Tax Collector knows he is not qualified even to look toward heaven when he prays. He simply asked God for mercy, admitting that he was a sinner. He didn't feel worthy of even looking toward God and he knew full well that he had no long list of religious accomplishments to present to God.

The Pharisee on the other hand, even while appearing to go through all the motions of praying, is so offended by the presence of the Publican in his "acceptance speech" for his award that he can only thank God that he is not like robbers, evil doers, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man.

The Pharisee arrived at the Temple (the Oscars) in his spiritual limo. The crowds cheered as he walked down the red carpet. The crowds were in awe as the well-rehearsed Pharisee pretended to be interested in his fans by posing for a few photographs. Then the Pharisee walked to the best place in



The gospel of Jesus Christ does not confer awards because actors flawlessly recite the lines religion writes for them or because they perform the ceremonies and rituals religion dictates.

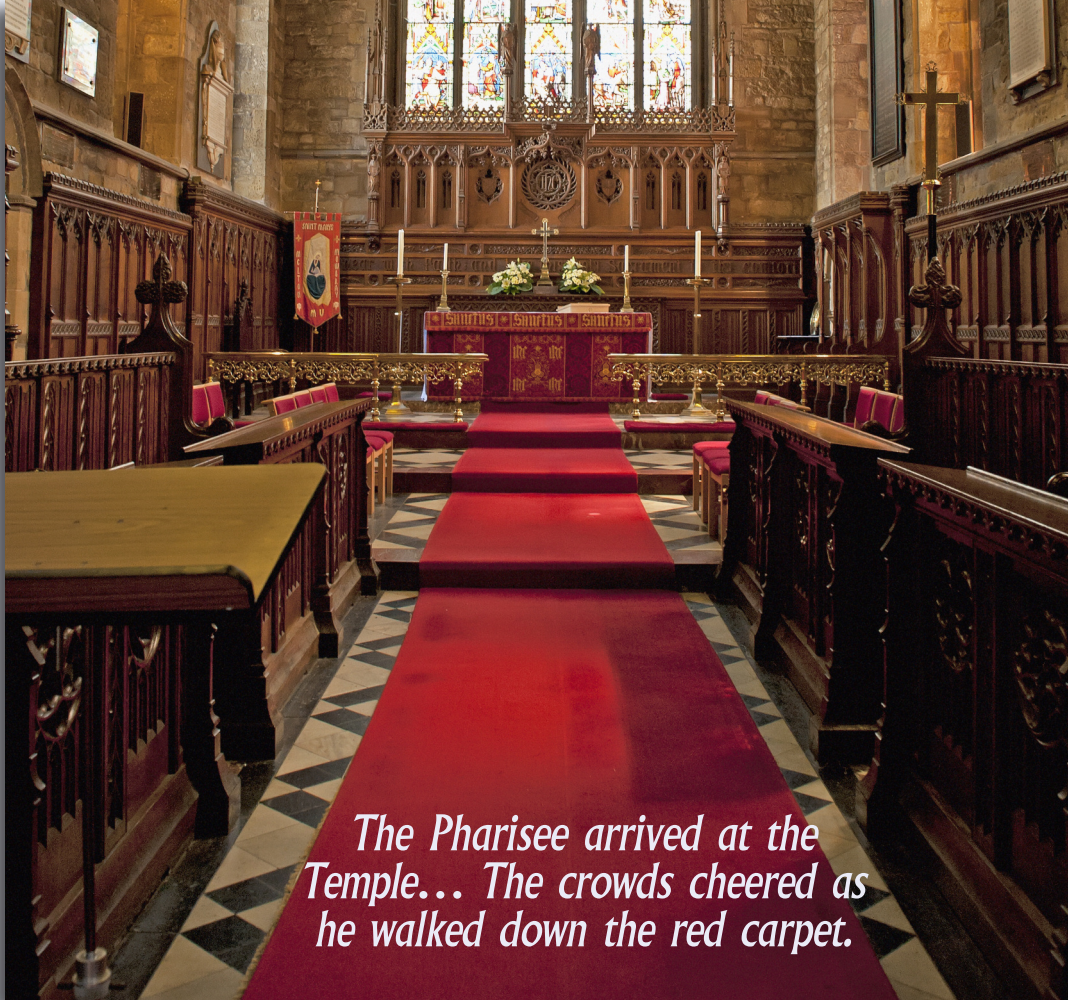
the Temple—to the front row where the television cameras could easily find him. The Pharisee seemed self-assured that even God was one of his fans. The Pharisee didn't wait for God to announce his award—he preempted God, took over the microphone and announced to God (and everyone else) that he fasted twice a week and paid tithes.

The Pharisee wasn't praying to God—he was praying to himself on the altar and stage of the god of religious performance. The Pharisee's prayer was all about making sure everyone else saw him doing what was considered the right thing, at the right time in the right place.

The prayer of the Pharisee was, "Thank God I am not like other people." The Pharisee was so filled with a false sense of spiritual confidence that he was handing out the religious best-performance Oscar to himself—in his mind, his religious performances exalted him far beyond the despicable Tax Man.

The Second Curve Ball

The original readers began by identifying with the Pharisee in the



The Pharisee arrived at the Temple... The crowds cheered as he walked down the red carpet.

parable, but then they realized Jesus had thrown them a curve ball—so as they heard the prayers of the two men, they switched allegiances. Now the original audience no doubt identified with the humility of the Tax Man. As Jesus concludes the parable, he provides the warning...*If you walk around with your nose in the air, you'll wind up flat on your face.*

But now comes the second curve ball that tempts us to swing and miss. The original readers (and you and I) start to feel superior to the Pharisee because we are not nearly as filled with pride as he was.

The second curve ball that we might swing at and miss is when we jump into the opposite dugout and “judge the hell” out of the Pharisee.

In such a scenario we pray *“Thank God I am not like that Pharisee.”* It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the devious twists and turns of spiritual pride. When we think we are right and we are sure that others are wrong, we wind up making the same error as the Pharisee.

So how do we read this parable? Again, we ask, why did Jesus give this parable? He gave this parable as a clear warning about the ever present danger that trust in religious performance will lead to pride, posing and posturing, whereas the heart of Jesus is humility, as displayed by the Publican.

In this parable Jesus counters the popular belief that this Pharisee and all Pharisees who follow him “act” just like God wanted.

If God only cared about religious activities, then the Pharisees would have been heroes of the faith.—Francis Chan

- The gospel of Jesus Christ overturns the belief of Christ-less religion that acting and performing is pleasing to God.

- The gospel of Jesus Christ does not confer awards because actors flawlessly recite the lines religion writes for them or because they perform the ceremonies and rituals religion dictates.

- The big-business enterprise of Christ-less religion can produce arrogant people who believe that they and their denomination alone

have a monopoly on God. They sincerely believe God loves them and no one else—or at least they believe God loves them more than anyone else. Therefore, in the arrogance of their religious posturing they say, *“Thank God I am not like other people.”*

- Christ-less religion can produce judgmental people who try to shame and stigmatize those who are not part of their denomination or church. They preach against people whose sins they believe to be the worst of all sins, rather than trying to serve them in the name of Jesus.

- Christ-less religion goes to incredible lengths to evangelize the “unsaved” (anyone not a member of their church)—attempting to persuade them to join their church—telling them unless they join, they will burn forever in the eternal conscious torment of hell.

Ironically, many of these zealots are already held captives in the hell of religious legalism, even as they try to convince others to join them in their misery. We recall the words of Jesus: *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are”* (Matthew 23:15).

- Christ-less religion makes people confident of their own righteousness rather than being thankful for the righteousness of Jesus Christ, offered and given to whomever he wishes, whenever he wishes, by the grace of God.

- Christ-less religion gives people a false sense of spiritual confidence through deception and lies, telling its captives that all the religious stuff they do, the rituals they perform, the laws they obey, the programs they follow and the ceremonies in which they participate make them unique, more loved by God, special and in short leads them to pray *“Thank God I am not like other people.”*

So, will we choose the humility of Jesus or the pride of religious performance? □