

2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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.”

Justified before God

2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

‘God I thank you that I am not like other people

Here’s the image of a ‘religious person’ in Jesus’s parable, taken from what he observed going on around him. Pharisees were establishment figures, admired by the synagogue hierarchy. This one has devoutly kept the law of God, but crucially, is very pleased with himself for doing so. This is still undoubtedly how ‘religious’ people are seen today. Of course there are people who give the church a bad name, like the rich preachers who travel in private jets, or paedophile priests, but they can be clearly seen to be doing the exact opposite of what Jesus taught. They only think of themselves. The bible passage we just heard is Jesus, who Christians believe to be God, teaching us that our attitude should be one of humility and not self-righteousness. Jesus was not self-righteous. “Why do you call me good?” he said. “No one is good except God”. He *did* say “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”, which might seem like an outrageous statement, but as C.S. Lewis and others have said, based on what Jesus said about himself, he must have been either mad or bad or exactly who he said he was.

And if you look at how he lived his life, you can't convincingly make the case for anything other than that he *was* who he said he was, God in human form.

If you look at British society today, it's clear that there's been a loss of moral integrity. If not among the wider population, then definitely among those with power to make decisions which define our values and where we're going as a country. To understand how we can live better, we need to look at the words of Jesus. Because if Jesus *is* who he said He is, then He is the source of all moral understanding. He is the source of our ideas of right and wrong.

Look at the second character in the parable. Tax collectors, were seen by everyone in first century Palestine as crooks. This could even be Matthew, the writer of the first gospel, who had been a tax collector. The context is important – he's someone who's working for the occupying Roman Empire; almost certainly cooking the books, and making a lot of money out of it, and so he's someone who the Pharisee, the religious leader, sees as a criminal propped up by the establishment. If you want a modern day comparison then maybe a scammer cold calling you and hacking your bank account.

The tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Notice the difference between the two men. For the Pharisee, what matters is his own words, position and moral certainty; for the tax-collector, all that matters now is his attitude to God. He's turned to God and acknowledged that he's lost his way.

And he's asked for help.

Jesus has this to say:

"I tell you that the tax collector rather than the Pharisee, went home justified before God. Because all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." 'Justified before God' here means 'forgiven, and at peace with God and with himself'. Luke tells us that this parable is 'for those who are confident they're right and everyone else is wrong.' And it says that they will inevitably be brought down. God's way is to just be humble to start with. And don't thank God you're not like the Pharisee that makes you a hypocrite!

No one could find fault with Jesus except those who thought he blasphemed by claiming to be God. Billions of people today would disagree with this.

And he, who was God, sacrificed himself for all of us, even people who don't believe in Him. The hope we have, the hope for those like Obi, baptised and brought up in the faith, is that he didn't stay dead but that more than 500 people witnessed the fact that he rose from the dead. And so if we believe in Him we have the same hope of eternal life. The Greek word for eternal life used in the gospels is *aionios* which actually means *quality* of life and not length of life at all. It begins not when we die, but *now*, whenever we turn away from our sin, change direction and believe in Jesus as the Son of God, who is *himself* the way, the truth and the life.

Amen.