

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Trusting in Ourselves

A life of righteousness is a good thing, but not if it leads us into a haughty contempt for others. Humility requires a better understanding of our own standing before God.

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Lk. 18:9).



What follows is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, two men who prayed to God with entirely different attitudes, and very different prayers (v. 10-14). The parable is powerful in its own right, but Luke’s introduction leaves no room for missing the main lesson.

Luke identifies Jesus’ target audience as those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” The one who “trusts in himself” is not someone who defies God’s authority in favor of finding his own way. The Pharisee in this parable saw himself as God’s champion, acknowledging God’s role in his life by the prayer he prayed to Him. This Pharisee was not a hypocrite. There is nothing in this parable to indicate that he was bending the facts to make himself look good. In fact, the type of person of whom Jesus is speaking can be a paragon of moral strength

(“I am not an extortioner, unjust, adulterer”), self-discipline (“I fast twice a week”), and generosity (“I give tithes of all I possess”). Here is a man who is seemingly everything God wants him to be. So what’s the problem?

The problem is the attitude of self-congratulation this virtuous life can create. Jesus is condemning the delusion that we can become so good at understanding and applying God’s law that we earn the right to pat ourselves on the back for our brilliance. We have everything figured out, and our ticket to heaven is punched.

Not only are we proud of what we have accomplished, but our sterling character grants us a license to “despise others” who have not achieved our superior level of performance. The Pharisee was thankful to God, to be sure—but more for his superiority over his neighbor (v. 11), rather than for God’s mercy in dealing with his own imperfections.

In this parable Jesus was not condemning the Pharisee’s goodness. He was condemning the self-righteous *pride* that grew out of that goodness.

Instead of trusting in ourselves, our trust should be in Jesus and His sacrifice. Paul was one of the best men who ever lived, yet his desire was to be found in Christ, “not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:9). Despite all his goodness, he still saw himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), forever in need of the grace of God.

That is why I am a little uneasy with the style of preaching that dwells on a steady message of “we’re right and they’re wrong.” Certainly truth must be taught and error must be exposed. But if we are not careful, we can lull ourselves into a self-righteous stupor that leaves little incentive for self-improvement, and no compassion for others.

Whatever degree of righteousness we may achieve in this life, our attitude should always be that of the tax collector: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (v. 13). It is the man who trusts God for righteousness instead of himself who will be justified.

– David King