

Are You a Pharisee or a Publican?

Do you consider yourself a moral and religious person? Do you feel that you're good enough to merit heaven? Once the Lord Jesus told a parable to "some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else" (Luke 18:9-14):

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

By human standards the Pharisee was a good, exemplary citizen, and more zealous in his religion than most of us. This man was quite unlike the notorious publican who had nothing to offer God.

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.'

Conscious of his spiritual poverty and unworthiness, this miserable man stood afar off and he would not even raise his eyes from the ground. His only qualification was 'I am a sinner'; he came before God empty-handed, begging for mercy.

Well then, who are you – the Pharisee or the tax collector?

Perhaps you protest that unlike the Pharisee you are not bragging about your good works nor are you looking down on others, and that, most importantly, you ascribe the merit of your works to the grace of God who enables you to live a godly life. But so did the Pharisee of the parable; he also attributed his good character and his achievements to God and thanked him for them.

What if you continue to rely on your works – albeit done by the grace of God – to merit eternal life? Will you be counted as righteous by God and admitted to heaven?

No, you will be not. You will be sent to hell with all your good works. For Jesus concludes:

I tell you that this man (the publican), rather than the other (the Pharisee), went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

The sinner is justified; the "good" man is not! The "good" man is too proud to see that he too is a sinner and worthy of condemnation just like everybody else.

May God open your eyes to see yourself as you really are, a sinner, and humble your heart that you may ask for what you do not deserve, mercy! He will justify you if, renouncing all confidence in yourself, you place your faith in Christ Jesus.