

Why are you here this morning?

Most of us go to a place of worship to connect with God, to nurture a relationship that we know is vital to our lives. And this is good—relationships require time, presence, and intention. Our relationship with God is no different. But how do we ensure that we are truly connecting with Him?

Many people approach their relationship with God as if it's all about following the rules—doing the things He wants us to do and avoiding the things He doesn't. We treat God like a picky neighbor who's always peering over the fence, ready to criticize the way we keep our spiritual house. We think that if we just keep everything in order, He'll be satisfied, and we can go on our way with His blessing.

But is that really what God desires from us? Is that the way to deepen our relationship with Him? Of course not.

To drive this point home, Jesus tells a story about two worshippers attending a church service. One is confident in his righteousness, eager to showcase his spiritual resume. The other is aware of his failures, too ashamed even to lift his eyes. Both come to the same place, with the same goal—to connect with God. But only one leaves having truly done so.

At this time, prayer was conducted in a large open court that surrounded the temple complex. A worshipper would approach one of the walls and take a position with their head covered. There they would speak with their God, their Father, their Creator, their judge.

Prayer is a very private thing. I am not sure I would want God posting my quiet time conversations. Why? Because prayer tells truths about me that I don't want known. Truths that, sometimes, I don't want to know myself.

When he entered, the Pharisee took a position away from everyone. And why not? He stands alone, at least in his own mind, as a paradigm of righteousness. "God," he begins, "I thank you that. . ." So far so good, the direction of his prayer seems appropriate. And the word "thank" expressed gratitude to the one who gives and sustains life. But these are just words. And words are easy. Lies are as easy to vocalize as truths. What is really going on in his heart? The next word tells us; "I". His first mention of God will be his last mention of God. Though God is presented as the first character in this man's story, he is only a minor character. The star of his story is himself.

Pride hides itself insidiously in the human heart. While it is easy to see in others, we often cannot see it in ourselves. But if we take inventory of our thoughts, words, and

actions; we can detect the presence of pride. This is especially those that occur when our guard is down, when we are caught off guard, when we are on autopilot. Like the Pharisee was this day:

*Lk 18:11–12 — "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."*

You can see his pride; can't you? But while pride is easy to identify in others, it is difficult to see in ourselves. How can we spot pride in our own heart? We can see it when it takes our eyes off God and focuses our attention instead on areas that feed our ego.

- *Pride looks at self when it should be looking at God. He did not pray, "I thank you that you" but "I thank you that I." It is a presentation of self righteousness that tips its hat to God for his help.*
- *Pride looks at others when it should be looking at God. Pride requires a point of reference by which we measure ourselves. We can't be good unless we have a standard. Pride causes us to compare ourselves to others, and always others who have greater struggles and different struggles than we do.*

The only person we should compare ourselves to is God and his perfect standard. There, all people find themselves wanting. And being found in that state of need, the only one we can turn to for help, once again, is our Father.

By contrast, the tax collector stands over in the corner, in a place where he will not be noticed by anyone but God. There, he would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast in torment. Though his eyes were turned away from heaven, he has looked at God and found himself wanting. And feeling the piercing truth of his need, he turns to God and cries, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Jesus concludes: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

At face value, everyone would have agreed with his assessment. Pride is easy to spot in others. And when we see it, we are immediately turned off. Why would God be any different? But why, if we understand this to be true, do we keep trying to earn our way to God's pleasure and blessing? Can you guess what the answer is? That's right. It is pride.

To address this, we need to change how we think about ourselves and our relationship with God.

God is not a peer who is helping us in our time of need. He is not our mentor equipping us to move closer to his level. We are more like infants. And if we are infants, then he is our Father. Consider the verses that follow this parable.

*Lk 18:15-18 — 15 Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 17 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." 18 And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

Now, think back to the last infant you cared for and answer the following questions:

- *How did that infant get your attention?*
- *What did the infant do to earn the right to be helped?*
- *Why did you choose to help the infant?*

God is not a picky neighbor. He is a loving Father. We are his infants, hopeless and helpless. Unable to do anything but cry to him for help.



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## Part II: Two Guys Walk Into a Church

