

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE XVIII. 9–14.

<p>9 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not as other men <i>are</i>, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. 12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of</p>	<p>all that I possess. 13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as <i>his</i> eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified <i>rather</i> than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted</p>
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THE parable we have now read is closely connected with the one which immediately precedes it. The parable of the persevering widow teaches the value of importunity in prayer. The parable of the Pharisee and publican teaches the spirit which should pervade our prayers. The first parable encourages us to pray and faint not. The second parable reminds us how and in what manner we ought to pray. Both should be often pondered by every true Christian.

Let us notice, firstly, *the sin against which our Lord Jesus Christ warns us in these verses*. There is no difficulty in finding out this. St. Luke tells us expressly, that “He spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” The sin which our Lord denounces is “self-righteousness.”

We are all naturally self-righteous. It is the family-disease of all the children of Adam. From the highest to the lowest we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to do. We secretly flatter ourselves that we are not so bad as some, and that we have something to recommend us to the favour of God. “Most men will proclaim everyone his own goodness.” (Prov. xx. 6.) We forget the plain testimony of Scripture: “In many things we offend all.” “There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not.” “What is man that he should be clean, or he that is born of a woman that he should be righteous.” (James iii. 2. Eccles. vii. 10. Job xv. 14.)

The true cure for self-righteousness is self-knowledge. Once let the eyes of our understanding be opened by the Spirit, and we shall talk no more of our own goodness. Once let us see what there is in our own hearts, and what the holy law of God requires, and self-conceit will die. We shall lay our hand on our mouths, and cry with the leper, “Unclean: unclean!” (Levit. xiii. 45.)

Let us notice, secondly, in these verses, *the prayer of the Pharisee which our Lord condemns*. We read that he said, “God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.”

One great defect stands out on the face of this prayer,—a defect so glaring

ing that even a child might mark it: it exhibits no sense of sin and need; it contains no confession and no petition,—no acknowledgment of guilt and emptiness,—no supplication for mercy and grace. It is a mere boasting recital of fancied merits, accompanied by an uncharitable reflection on a brother sinner. It is a proud, high-minded profession, destitute alike of penitence, humility, and charity. In short, it hardly deserves to be called a prayer at all.

No state of soul can be conceived so dangerous as that of the Pharisee. Never are men's bodies in such desperate plight as when mortification and insensibility set in; never are men's hearts in such a hopeless condition as when they are not sensible of their own sins. He that would not make shipwreck on this rock must beware of measuring himself by his neighbours. What does it signify that we are more moral than "other men"? We are all vile and imperfect in the sight of God. "If we contend with Him, we cannot answer Him one in a thousand." (Job ix. 3.) Let us remember this: in all our self-examination let us not try ourselves by comparison with the standard of men: let us look at nothing but the requirements of God. He that acts on this principle will never be a Pharisee.

Let us notice, thirdly, in these verses, *the prayer of the publican which our Lord commends*. That prayer was in every respect the very opposite of that of the Pharisee. We read that he "stood afar off, and smote upon his breast, and said, God be merciful to me a sinner." Our Lord Himself stamps this short prayer with the seal of His approbation. He says, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other."

The excellence of the publican's prayer consists in five points, each of which deserves attention. For one thing, it was a real *petition*. A prayer which only contains thanksgiving and profession, and asks nothing, is essentially defective: it may be suitable for an angel, but it is not suitable for a sinner. For another thing, it was a direct *personal* prayer. The Publican did not speak of his neighbours, but himself. Vagueness and generality are the great defects of most men's religion: to get out of "we," and "our," and "us," into "I," and "my," and "me," is a great step toward heaven. For another thing, it was a *humble* prayer: a prayer which put self in the right place. The publican confessed plainly that he was a sinner. This is the very A B C of saving Christianity: we never begin to be good till we can feel and say that we are bad. For another thing, it was a prayer in which *mercy* was the chief thing desired, and faith in God's covenant mercy, however weak, displayed. Mercy is the first thing we must ask for in the day we begin to pray: mercy and grace must be the subject of our daily petitions at the throne of grace till the day we die. Finally, the publican's prayer was one which came from his *heart*. He was deeply moved in uttering it: he smote upon his breast, like one who felt more than he could express. Such prayers are the

prayers which are God's delight. A broken and a contrite heart He will not despise. (Psalm li. 17.)

Let these things sink down into our hearts. He that has learned to feel his sins has great reason to be thankful. We are never in the way of salvation until we know that we are lost, ruined, guilty, and helpless. Happy indeed is he who is not ashamed to sit by the side of the publican! When our experience tallies with his we may hope that we have found a place in the school of God.

Let us notice, lastly, in these verses, *the high praise which our Lord bestows on humility*. He says, "Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

The principle here laid down is so frequently found in the Bible, that it ought to be deeply graven in our memories. Three times we find our Lord using the words before us in the Gospels, and on three distinct occasions. Humility, He would evidently impress upon us, is among the first and foremost graces of the Christian character. It was a leading grace in Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Job, Isaiah, and Daniel. It ought to be a leading grace in all who profess to serve Christ. All the Lord's people have not gifts or money; all are not called to preach, or write, or fill a prominent place in the Church; but all are called to be humble. One grace at least should adorn the poorest and most unlearned believer: that grace is humility.

Let us leave the whole passage with a deep sense of the great encouragement it affords to all who feel their sins, and cry to God for mercy in Christ's name. Their sins may have been many and great: their prayers may seem weak, faltering, unconnected, and poor; but let them remember the publican, and take courage. That same Jesus who commended his prayer is sitting at the right hand of God to receive sinners. Then let them hope and pray on.

NOTES. LUKE XVIII. 9-14.

9.—[*Unto certain which trusted, &c.*] It seems probable that this parable was not addressed to the Pharisees so much as to certain of our Lord's own followers and disciples. Our Lord knew all hearts, and He probably saw in some of His own immediate adherents a tendency to value themselves too highly because they were His disciples. He checks it by speaking this parable.

Pride, self-conceit, and a disposition to look down on others as ignorant, blind, and inferior to ourselves, are faults to which many converted people are peculiarly liable.

10.—[*A Pharisee...a publican.*] These two are mentioned as types of opposite classes of character. The Pharisee represents the moral, the respectable, and the externally correct. The publican represents the wicked, the profligate, and the utterly irreligious.

The theory held by some, that the Pharisee represents the Jewish nation, and the publican the Gentile world, appears to me destitute of foundation.

11.—[*Stood and prayed thus with himself.*] Some have thought that the Greek words should have been rendered, "stood by himself and prayed thus." It is probable, however, that our

English version gives the sense correctly.

It is a mistake to suppose, as some have done, that there was anything to be blamed, as indicative of pride, in the Pharisee's attitude. Standing was as common a position for prayer as kneeling, among the Jews. (See Matt. vi. 5; Mark xi. 25; 2 Chron. vi. 12.)

[*I thank thee.*] Gill gives some singular instances from Rabbinical writers of the thanksgivings which commonly formed part of Jewish prayers. One quotation will suffice. "It is a tradition of Rabbi Juda, saying three things a man ought to say every day: Blessed be Thou that Thou hast not made me a gentile; blessed be Thou that Thou hast not made me an unlearned man; blessed be Thou that Thou hast not made me a woman."

It needs hardly be noted, that we are not to infer that thankfulness is wrong in our prayers. It is thankfulness accompanied by self-conceit, and uncharitable comparisons of ourselves with other men, and unaccompanied by confession of unworthiness, and prayer for mercy and grace, which our Lord condemns.

- 12.—[*I fast twice...give tithes of all...&c.*] Here the Pharisee, let it be noted, exalts his own works of supererogation. He fasted even more than God required. He gave tithes even of things which God did not command to be tithed: not of his corn and his fruits only, but of all his possessions.

A more miserable and defective righteousness than this Pharisee's, it is hard to conceive. His negative goodness consisted in not being so bad as some! His positive goodness consisted in fasting and paying tithes with excessive scrupulosity! Of heart-holiness, we do not hear a word!

- 13.—[*Would not lift up.*] The Greek words mean literally, "was not willing to lift:" had no mind, or will, or inclination.

[*Be merciful to.*] It is not improbable that the idea of mercy through a propitiation enters into this prayer. The Greek word rendered, "be merciful to," is only found in one other place, and is there applied to our Lord Jesus Christ as a High Priest "making reconciliation" for the sins of the people. (Heb. ii. 17.)

[*A sinner.*] The Greek words are here even stronger than our version, if literally translated. They signify "*the sinner:*" that is, "the great sinner."

- 14.—[*Justified rather than the other.*] We must not suppose that this means that the Pharisee was a little justified, and the publican very much, and that the difference between them was only one of degree. There are no degrees in justification. The words mean that the Pharisee was not justified at all, or accepted with God, and that the publican went home pardoned, forgiven, and counted righteous before God.

[*Every one...exalteth...abased.*] The truth of this great principle admits of illustration at every step of Bible history. Pharaoh, Goliath, Haman, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, are all cases in point.