

# Voices: Jesus isn't done talking—then and now

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To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’



Eric Black “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.’

“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.”

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Luke 18:9-17)

## **One story, two parts**

Normally, we study these two stories separately, but what happens if we consider them together as two parts of the same story? What do we learn from them then?



The first story is included in a group of parables, and the second story is tied to it by the word “also.” See that insignificant little word “also”? Watch out for little words. They have much more power than their size and common usage suggest.

At the same time Jesus was telling these parables recorded by Luke, “people were also bringing babies to Jesus for him” to bless. Jesus was an opportunist. He used every opportunity he could to teach the deeper truths of life to the people who followed him.

### **Just imagine ...**

So, imagine for a moment a crush of people all trying to get face-to-face with Jesus for one reason or another—some to scrutinize him, some to be healed, some to be blessed, some to have their children blessed. Imagine the noise, the pushing and shoving, the dust kicked up by all those feet.

Imagine the haughtiness of those who expected others to get out of the way and the humility of others who never expected anything good to happen to them.

In the middle of all this crush and crowd and noise, Jesus said, “Two men went to the temple to pray.” This wasn’t all that unusual. The custom at the time was for men to pray twice every day, and the really religious prayed at least three times a day. So, these two men were doing their normal thing.

### **Two prayers**

One man, a Pharisee, a very religious man, stood apart from the crowd. The Greek here means he stood apart from all the rest of the people. His prayer tells us why. He prayed: “God, I am so thankful I’m not like these other people, these sinners, especially that one over there in the back. I’m so good, I fast more than the law requires and give lots of money, too.”

This sort of religious arrogance told “all the rest of the people” they weren’t good enough to get close to God. This sort of religious pomposity kept “all the rest of the people” at the back. This sort of religious pride made Jesus sick.

The other guy—a no-good tax collector, a traitor to his own people, a kiss-up to Rome—stood at the back of the room. He stood way back there, and he wouldn’t even look up. Unlike the Pharisee, he didn’t dare raise his head, and in anguish he beat his chest, and with red eyes and gritted teeth he prayed, “God, have mercy on me.”

We religious types, we read this first story and stop. We smile and thank God we know the whole story, and we say, “That is how we should pray, ‘God, have mercy on me.’” And we congratulate ourselves on knowing the whole story.

### **More to the story**

But Jesus isn’t done talking.

While he’s telling the story about the two praying men, people are bringing him their children to receive a blessing. This is what people did. Whenever a religious authority came to town, the people brought out their children to receive a blessing from the holy man. Jesus played the part well.

Unfortunately, the people weren’t listening to Jesus’ stories. They didn’t hear Jesus say the blessing is for the humble. They just kept pressing in, intent on what they wanted for themselves and for their children. And as

they pressed in, Jesus' disciples pushed back because they weren't listening, either.

They weren't listening because they were too worried about what positions they would hold in Jesus' kingdom. And as the desperate crowd pressed in, they puffed out their chests as only a security detail can do and pushed back.

And Jesus said: "Uh, fellas, step off. Come here, kids."

The noise level probably dropped a little, the way a crowd gets quiet when someone important is dressed down in front of everyone. In that quiet space, Jesus said: "These kids, they have what it takes to take a place in my kingdom. These kids, they don't know yet to pretend to be righteous. So, don't teach them your ways. Don't take their innocence away from them. Instead, look at them, and return to yourself."

I wonder how long the quiet lasted.

### **What about us?**

In this quiet space, what is Jesus saying to us?

At one point, we were the humble tax collectors seeking mercy, but at some point, we forgot ourselves. At some point, we got too big for our britches. At some point, we became full of ourselves and moved right up in God's face and dared to thank him that we're so good. We dared to tell God that God owes us because we've been so religious, so devout.

In the meantime, the children would like to be blessed but can't get to Jesus because we've taken up our positions in order to push back. The children, not knowing any better, just want to be close to Jesus, and here we are, in the way.

- The twenty- and thirty-somethings want to know their hard questions will

be taken seriously.

- The teenagers want to sing the songs they know, the songs that stir their hearts.
- The children want to laugh and play and to know Jesus laughs and plays, too.
- They all want to do something meaningful without having to jump through all the hoops.

And what are we doing while Jesus tries to tell them stories? We're complaining about the style and quality of the music. We're putting our feet down to guard our turf, to make sure no one messes with our tradition. We're trying to keep the ship afloat when the kids would rather swim anyway.

And pastors are expected to preside over it all!

What has happened to our faith?

When did we stop beating our chests and praying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" and start thumping our chests and boasting about how good we are?

What will it take for us to return to ourselves?

Lord, have mercy, indeed.

*Eric Black is pastor of First Baptist Church in Covington, Texas, and a member of the Baptist Standard board of directors.*