

OVERVIEW

1. The false promise of a perfect performance
2. The surprising security that comes with being real

OPENING QUESTIONS

- When I see my sins or faults, how do I feel? How do I react?
- Do I see understanding my sin as a way to get closer to God, or as a source of shame and embarrassment? Why?

INTRODUCTION

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector teaches us that dealing with sin doesn't have to be negative—it can be a stepping stone to closeness with God.

Hiding or denying our sins will leave us lonely and far from God. Owning up to them and asking for help will leave us secure and connected to God.

1. THE FALSE PROMISE OF A PERFECT PERFORMANCE

To some who were **confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else**, Jesus told this parable: [10] "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. [11] 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. [12] I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

– Luke 18:9-12 NIV

- **Who was Jesus talking to?** He told this story to people who were confident about how good they were, and looked down on others to feel better about themselves.
- **Jesus wanted them to be free.** Jesus knew that no one is really perfect or good all the time (see Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8-10, and Mark 10:18).
- **What do we learn about the Pharisee?**
 - **He stands by himself.** His self-righteousness must have affected his relationships.
 - **He is obsessed with and defines himself and other people based on performance.** If someone messes up and sins, they are "evildoers" to him. He does not want to think of himself as an "evildoer" so he focuses only on what he thinks he does right. In a word, he is prideful.
- **Pride leads to loneliness.** Focusing on our own and others' performances does not help us build relationships. He is pretending to be someone he is not, so he can't be close to anyone, including God.

Pause and reflect

- How do I define myself? Do I define myself by comparing my performance to other people in order to feel better than them?
- Or, do I define myself through God's eyes in which performance means nothing and close relationships mean everything?

NOTES

2. THE SURPRISING SECURITY THAT COMES WITH BEING REAL

"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."

– Luke 18:13-14 NIV

- **What do we learn about the tax collector?**
 - **He is emotionally honest about shame and guilt.**
 - **He is not trying to prove himself** nor make himself look better than he is.
 - **He is not comparing himself to anyone else;** he just wants to tell God how he feels.
 - **He knows that God is merciful.** He believes that God can handle hearing all of his emotions and will still love him and believe in him.
 - **He leaves this prayer on good terms with God.** Knowing that the God who created the universe is on your side and accepts you, faults and all, is an incredible source of security and confidence. It is much better than the false sense of security that comes from comparing yourself to other people or pretending to be perfect.
- **How does this relate to me?** God wants a real relationship with you. He does not care about your performance, but just wants you to be your true, messy self.

Pause and reflect

- How much do I express my honest emotions to God and my friends?
- How comfortable am I in my own skin?
- Do I leave my prayer times confident and relaxed?

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Wrapping up

Jesus told this story because he knows it can be hard for us to handle uncomfortable truths and feelings of shame and embarrassment. He wants us to understand that God can handle any emotion we feel so we can express them honestly. Instead of always having to cut people down to feel better about ourselves, he wants us to be comfortable being exactly who we are so we can be close to him and relaxed and happy with friends and family.

In closing, spend some time reflecting on these questions:

1. Which person in Jesus' story do I relate to the most? How?
2. What are one or two things I have been holding in that I could express to be more free and relaxed?
3. How can I change my view of God to understand that he can handle any emotion I throw at him without losing his love and belief in me?