

THE DEBT I OWE

Lk. 18:13 God be merciful to me a sinner.

Jesus was dealing with the Pharisees and pointing out their vain style of religion, appropriately manipulated to suit their arrogance. In complete contrast, He introduced a tax-collector, ... one of the most despised people in society. ... Which would you choose to uphold? ... It's not a great choice! On the other hand, when God looked at you and me, what did He see in us that He should decide to have anything to do with us, why would *God* be interested in *me*? Why did He look at the likes of me and send His Son into this world to die on a cross?

For our study, let's, - for a large part, - set aside the Pharisee ... not because he's not important, - he is, - ... but let's concentrate on what happened to the tax-collector, and see how privileged he was to be *indebted to the Lord*.

Being a Christian is about being in a relationship with God, through the Lord Jesus Christ. ... It's not about how many times you attend church, or how many religious thoughts you manage to have, - these are consequences of being a Christian, but they don't 'make' you one. It is not about living out a religion, for it is much more personal. ... Religiously devout people visit shrines, and they put themselves through all kinds of activities to try and please their image of 'god'.

Now, obviously this Pharisee believed he was the virtue of true religion for he let it be known how 'perfect' he was, **Lk. 18:11** *God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹² I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.* ... It's a 'poor show' when you have to elevate yourself. If you have to *tell* other people how good you are, it says quite a lot, doesn't it?! But that is what the Pharisee was doing ... and Jesus commented that, - for all the man's talk about himself, - he went away without any change in his life (v.14). It did not do him any good, either being a Pharisee, or going to the temple. In fact, notice how Jesus described what he did, **Lk. 18:11** *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself,* ... The Pharisee was 'polishing' his own spiritual ego.

Look at the tax-collector though ... And, for a moment, - because that is all it takes, - listen to his prayer, **¹³ God be merciful to me a sinner** ... As we say, if you'd have blinked, you'd have missed it ... and yet consider how He addressed the Lord.

THE SINNER'S PRAYER This taxman would have walked along the street and you knew what he was. He was a disgrace for he had prostituted himself for monetary gain, - what he got was by devious means and by fraternising with the enemy. He was 'dirt' ... He was absolute 'filth'. A decent person wouldn't have spoken to him. You would have crossed the road to the other side. ... And as he

made his way up the steps into the temple, you would have wondered what a man like him was doing going into a holy place like that! The money he dropped into the temple coffers was money he had pilfered and embezzled from others. ... He was no better than a 'rat' ... He belonged in the sewer of society!

Nonetheless, he *did* walk into the temple for 'something' working inside him took him there ... He knew he had a need his 'dirty' money could not buy. His head would have been bowed, ashamed. He heard the noise of the people round him saying their prayers ... standing there, - habitually, - with their hands in the air ... and he looked for a space where no one would see him, nor hear his 'inadequate' prayer. ... It would have been difficult for him for he knew how they prayed ... standing there with their tassles and all the regalia ... bobbing backwards and forwards, repetitiously muttering their lines from the traditions of their fathers ... That was not like anything he could do for he wasn't one of them.

But, just there where he was ... 'sleeking' in a corner away from the rest, this tax collector couldn't even lift his head, never mind his hands ... Instead, he simply beat himself on his chest, - not to make a 'show' of himself, - but because he knew what kind of a pitiful creature he was ... he was sorry, and that is why he was there ... truly genuinely sorry for the wretched man he had turned out to be ... especially in the presence of God, in the house of God.

No one dragged him into the temple. It wasn't as if he was to gain any financial value for being there. There was no alternate or underhand motive. He genuinely came to meet with God because he knew he was a sinner in need of forgiveness.

He didn't pray a long prayer with fancy words. He simply prayed a personal prayer, **13 God be merciful to me a sinner.** ... And that was it! ... From the depths of his heart, that's all he could say because he knew his life was in a mess without God. He didn't put up to be something he wasn't for he confessed to the Lord he was a sinner needing to be saved, and he believed only God's grace would change his life ... Just a simple prayer, and yet his words reached up into Heaven, **13 God be merciful to me a sinner.** ... **The sinner's prayer**; there is also ...

THE SAVIOUR'S PROMISE What would have been the point in making the way up to the temple if God wasn't willing to hear his prayer? What would have been the point of that humiliating walk through all those crowds if he didn't believe there was a God Who cared for him ... a God Who would listen to him?

He went to the temple and found a quiet corner, - away from everyone, - and he prayed words straight from his heart, **God be merciful to me a sinner.** It doesn't seem

anyone else heard, but Jesus heard ... Nobody else needed to hear, - it was a personal conversation with the Lord. ... The Pharisee in front of him definitely didn't hear for he was so busy telling God how good he was!

Here was a man who was carrying the heaviest burden, and he couldn't put it down until he brought it to the Lord. ... What *was* his burden? ... He tells you, - the burden of his sin ... he was a sinner needing God's mercy. ... Mercy is not something you can earn ... Mercy is what you ask for when you are sorry for having caused an offence. You cannot earn it, - it has to be given to you, and this man knew he had no right to ask and yet he trusted in God.

Not everybody would be like this man and admit they are a sinner, but the plain fact is God's Word says *all* have sinned (Rom. 3:23) ... and this man didn't need any more convincing. He knew it, and he knew he had to do something about it ... and that is why he came into the house of God and opened up his heart.

Forgiveness from sin doesn't come to those who don't believe they need it, - the Pharisee didn't believe he needed it because he reckoned he was good enough ... in fact, it comes across as if God was 'lucky' to have him! ... The other man, though, - the tax-collector, - he knew it was nothing to do with 'luck', or where you came from, or where you were educated, or how you were dressed, or anything else ... for he knew to be made right with God, he had to cry out for mercy the Lord would save *him* from *his* sin ... *and God heard him!*

He wasn't religious, but he knew enough to know that if he sincerely cried out, God would answer his prayer. ... That day, in the temple in Jerusalem, - while another man was boasting how good he was, - God had stopped listening and was attending to the prayer of this tax-collector who couldn't even lift his head, but earnestly pleaded, "Lord, I'm a lost hell-deserving sinner and I'm pleading with You to come and be merciful unto me, even though I don't deserve it". ... God heard him, and He passed by the Pharisee and answered the prayer of the seeking sinner ... Jesus had not come, **Lk. 5:32 to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.** ... **The sinner's prayer, the Saviour's promise ...**

THE SAVIOUR'S PRESENCE Notice how Jesus puts it, **14 I tell you – ... *Jesus knows!*** ... The eyes of God were on that man, even as he made his way up the steps and into the temple. How does He know? ... He knows because He is the Sovereign God, **Is. 65:24 before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.** ... God doesn't do anything by accident. Neither does He wait around to see what we might happen to do ... Instead, He works independently, and that is what we see here ... It wasn't by any invitation of the Pharisees this tax-collector

was in the temple, - *definitely not!* And neither was it because the man decided to be there, - it would have been the last place! ... Think of how that man wrestled with going into where all those ‘good’ folk were ... and he, a sinful wretch! ... “You can’t go there! You’re not good enough!” ... But what took him there was the irresistible compulsion to meet with the God Who *would* change his life.

Above the religious boastings of the Pharisee and all the other religious elite, God heard this man’s whisper of a prayer ... for Jesus continued, **14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified** ... That means the penalty for his sin was paid, **Rom. 5:9** being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

When that man cried out his simple prayer, **God be merciful to me a sinner** Jesus tells us his prayer was answered for that was all God needed to hear! He didn’t need to hear the man was going to change career and become a Pharisee and work the rest of his days in the temple ... Neither did He need to hear this man saying, “God, I’ve made a mess out of my life, and I want you to sort out my problems so I can get away on down the road again and pick up where I left off”. No, he prayed the prayer of repentance, **God be merciful to me a sinner** ... “God, save me” ... The Lord answered his prayer, and that is how he left the temple **justified**, and God travelled with him back to his home, and He never left him from that day on.

CONCLUSION I always hope everyone who comes into this building goes away having met with God ... otherwise, I feel I have failed ... Out of the two men Jesus spoke about, it was the unlikely one who went away satisfied. ... No matter how big a rascal, God’s grace changed that man’s life. ... And that is why God sent His Son into this world, - to change lives for His glory. ... If you don’t know about it yet, simply ask Him, and He’ll show you ... Here’s the verse of a hymn which explains it,

In loving-kindness Jesus came
My soul in mercy to reclaim,
And from the depths of sin and shame
Through grace He lifted me.

Another hymn says ...

He paid a debt He did not owe,
I owed a debt I could not pay ...
He didn’t give to me a loan,
He gave Himself, now He’s my own ...
My debt He paid upon the cross.

There is nothing more to be settled ... for on the cross the Lord Jesus paid in full **the debt we owed.**