

True and Fast Religion

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[0 : 0 0] the American preacher theologian John MacArthur once said this he said there have always been but two systems of religion in the world one is God's system of divine accomplishment the other is man's system of human achievement one is the religion of God's grace the other the religion of men's works one is the religion of faith the other the religion of the flesh one is the religion of the sincere heart and the internal the other the religion of hypocrisy and the external within man's system he says are thousands of religious forms and names but they are all ultimately built on the achievements of man and the inspiration of Satan

Christianity on the other hand is the religion of divine accomplishment and it stands alone in other words he's simply saying that whereas there may be hundreds or even thousands of different religions and traditions and philosophies that are practiced and adhered to and followed at any given time in the final analysis it really boils down to just two systems each of which is diametrically opposed to the other either our identity in life and all of our hope will be based upon who we are and upon our own merit our own righteousness and achievements achievements in life or it will be solely determined by who God is and by what he has accomplished on our behalf

I say all of that this evening because this is really the crucial distinction that Jesus Christ was highlighting for us in the parable that we just read together we're told in verse 9 that the reason he told this parable was that some people quote trusted in themselves that they were righteous there is the crucial problem if you like that Jesus himself was diagnosing and then of course because of that presumed self-righteousness the reason was the result was rather that they then it says they treated others with contempt and so the picture here is that Jesus had been teaching a crowd of people as he often did whilst his disciples would have been his primary focus his chief concern in this particular context we can also see back in verse 20 of chapter 17 that as was often the case the Pharisees were also there hanging around in the background and as they often did they were trying to trip

Jesus up along the way but of course Jesus was very familiar with the Pharisaic problem Jesus knew that their fundamental issue wasn't just the fact that they simply rejected his identity as the Messiah as if to say that they were kind of looking out for the Messiah but they just didn't think it was him he knew that their problem was one of spiritual blindness and it was a blindness that was exacerbated in a sense or we might say manifested itself by this religion of self righteousness these were men who had managed to convince themselves that as long as they were seen by the world at large to be performing all of the outward and external requirements of the law and along with that law all of their own additional rights and rituals and customs and so on then they could be known as the righteous ones men who were a cut above and a set apart from everyone else and so what

Jesus was doing in this parable was he was effectively giving both a rebuke to the Pharisees and yet at the same time a warning to his own disciples to the Pharisees he was saying here is a picture of what the attitude of true religion really looks like in comparison to this false system which you men are practicing but then to his disciples he was saying be very careful that you don't start to imbibe or to emulate the kind of religious pride the kind of arrogance which has clearly become such a snare to these men and so how does Jesus illustrate this point this great divide between the pride and the self-righteousness of false religion on the one hand and the humility the meekness the God dependence of true religion on the other well he basically highlights this great contrast by telling us of two very different men two very different prayers and two very different outcomes first of all he tells us about two very different men he says in verse 10 two men went up into the temple to pray one a

[6 : 26] Pharisee the other a tax collector now if you wanted to paint a picture in the first century of two men who were at completely opposite ends of the spectrum religiously speaking you could not paint that picture in more stark terms than with a Pharisee and a tax collector one could be a member of the Jewish ruling council the Sanhedrin someone who not only had authority over religious affairs but a man who would have been viewed as the most devout and disciplined of all men in the practice of religious things tax collectors on the other hand were viewed as I'm sure many of you are aware they were viewed by the Jews at this time as the absolute refuse of society not only were they employed by a very oppressive

Roman regime which of course made them traitors in the eyes of the Jewish people but they were basically out and out thieves they were men who practiced extortion in order to make for themselves a better living our Kent Hughes commentates saying in today's culture the closest social equivalent would be drug pushers and pimps those who prey upon society those who make money of others bodies and make a living from stealing from stealing from other people and so Jesus was painting here what would have been at this time a very dramatic and quite a shocking scene the truth is anyone listening to this story at this particular time would have been very aware of the fact that tax collectors didn't go to the temple at all in fact if a

Pharisee had even touched a tax collector at this time then he would have been considered ceremonially unclean and yet here is Jesus basically speaking of these men as if they were in a sense equals he says these two men went up to the temple to pray one was a Pharisee oh and the other was a tax collector do you see this is a statement that would have had people really sitting up and taking notice it was quite a shocking thing for Jesus to have said and yet with this simple little statement there is surely a reminder to us here of the fact that true religion is always the greatest leveler of individuals that it's never the case that one man is valued more highly or esteemed more greatly by God on account of where he happened to have been raised or what his standing in society might be in comparison to the man who never had that particular background or those same privileges why because each and every one of us was born into that very same state of total depravity sinfulness before a holy God so that whether you're a Pharisee or a tax collector whether you were raised in the most

God-fearing home and then educated at some great university or you came to the Lord Jesus Christ after a life of drug abuse and alcoholism and crime the truth is all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and because that is the case the only reason that you and I can do anything at all that is worthy in this lifetime is on account of the sovereign grace of the living God in the person of his blessed son the Lord Jesus Christ but do you see the Pharisees simply could not see things in this way they have become blinded by this prideful spirit superiority self righteousness an unhealthy and imbalanced focus on their ethnic roots and their own assumed performance of religious duties this leads us on to the second thing we see in the parable which is not just two very different men but then two very different attitudes expressed through prayer first of all look at what he tells us about the

Pharisee the Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus a better translation there would probably say the Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself to himself to himself now standing up to pray wouldn't have necessarily been seen as anything out of the ordinary at this particular time it was one of the acceptable ways for men to pray in the temple but given what this man goes on to actually say in his prayer given the fact that his direction of prayer is not exactly towards God it is more a kind of congratulating of self it is pretty clear in this text is it not that this is a man whose posture is one of self elevation and pride the picture really is of a man who was kind of puffing out his chest or so to speak he was making a show of himself wanting to appear spiritually superior to those around him in the church and if that was his general demeanour his posture look at what he actually says

[13 : 18] 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 so what is going on here first of all he compares himself to other men he claims to be superior less sinful than those other men and secondly the basis on which he assumes that righteousness is on the basis not of what God has done for him but on the basis of what he has done in the realm of organised religion friends we mustn't miss the fact that this attitude this demeanour this wrong spirit is actually a very present and an ongoing danger for every one of us particularly we might say those of us who hold to strong doctrine convictions in terms of reformed

Calvinistic doctrine isn't it true that we can so easily begin to think of ourselves more highly than we ought a spirit of superiority perhaps on the basis that we really are reformed in doctrine on the basis that we perhaps attended a certain university or have lots of letters after our name or on the basis that we simply didn't once live that same life of decadence and immorality as someone just along the queue from us or just down the road from us and you think to yourself what is that if it's not just a modern diversion of what we see in this first century Pharisee first of all an identity which is primarily based upon a comparison between ourselves and others and secondly an over inflated view of what we think we have done that somehow makes us more righteous than the next person but do you see that God himself is nowhere in that equation the whole thing is a subtle lie and it's one which bypasses completely the glorious work of free and unmerited grace in Jesus

Christ well what a difference we see in this so called rotten little tax collector look at what it says in verse 13 the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast saying God be merciful to me a sinner now again let's not miss the detail here it's very important Jesus has explained things in precise and particular ways for our own good first of all we can see that so great was this man's sense of unworthiness and sinfulness before God that not only was he standing far off verse 13 but he didn't even presume to be able to look up to the heavens in other words in the direction of his creator what a difference thing between first of all the man's overall posture his demeanour and that of the

Pharisee secondly not only is there a clear conviction of sin in this man but there is also a mourning over that sin it says in verse 13 he physically beat his breast this is a picture this is the action of someone who's expressing genuine heartfelt sorrow anguish because of his own guilt before God in other words there's nothing superficial or frivolous here you know this is not a man who's just going through the religious motions as it were as he recites some kind of corporate confession in the church this is a man who is aware he is conscious he is expressing genuine sorrow for his sin against holy

God so first there's his conviction of sin then there is the sorrow that he feels in the light of that guilt and then third look at what the man prays he says God be merciful to me a sinner there's two little details in that prayer that we need to notice very carefully the first thing is that where it says a sinner there as in be merciful to me a sinner in the Greek it would really be God be merciful to me the sinner or the sinful one so the language here is actually very reminiscent of those words do you remember spoken by the apostle Paul in 1st Timothy chapter 1 where he speaks of himself as being the foremost or the chief of all sinners the worst of sinners in fact maybe the apostle maybe he even had this parable in mind when he made that statement to Timothy all those years later on as he came towards the end of his life maybe there he was later on reflecting on the very words of Jesus in this parable and he said that is me

[19 : 55] I am the chief I am the foremost of sinners well we don't know but what we do know is the picture Jesus was painting for us here as being the beginning or the starting point of true religion was of a man who was honestly and humbly acknowledging confessing his own particular and personal sense of unworthiness and sinfulness before his God not only that but the second thing here and I think this is a wonderful little detail is that he also demonstrates with whatever knowledge he may or may not have had he demonstrates this sense of looking to and trusting in what only God could do on his behalf very interesting that the

Greek verb for merciful there God be merciful to me is the word *helaskamai* this is a word that means to make propitiation for it speaks of the appeasing of God's wrath in other words it always speaks to us of an atonement for sin by means of blood sacrifice and so the great contrast here is that whereas this religious Pharisee offers up a prayer which is entirely focused on his own perceived righteousness the upright way in which he thinks he has conducted his affairs throughout life do you see that the entire focus of this irreligious tax collector and all of his trust was in the work that only

God could do on his behalf it is a wonderful picture of both the simplicity and the Christ centeredness of true religion and saving faith the need to not only come with humility and honesty before the living God as we confess our own personal rebellion against him but then also not only the need to confess that rebellion and sinfulness but then the need to look up and away from ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ who himself has made provision and who himself became an atonement for that sin on his cross this man was in many ways like a living example of those great words of the old hymn naked come to thee for dress helpless look to thee for grace vile

I to the mountain fly wash me saviour or I die nothing in my hand I bring simply to the cross I cling you know friends this is always one of the fundamental dividing lines between true and false religion we might say it is the fundamental dividing line the question of how is my sin going to be taken care of how am I going to be made right with the living God is it finally dealt with by Jesus Christ his righteous life his atoning death his bodily resurrection from the grave or is it something that needs to be topped up or even replaced by my own works of righteousness righteousness and of course lest we think of this as some kind of minor point of division just look at the final contrast that

Jesus describes here in verse 14 because here are two very different outcomes that result from these two distinct religions he says I tell you this man meaning the tax collector 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 what is he saying he's saying every man and every woman who's assumed standing before God is based upon his or her own merit his or her own works that person he's saying will be condemned to hell whereas every man and every woman who is humbled by the grace of God and therefore is wholly entirely dependent on his own mercy in the person of

[26 : 01] Jesus Christ will be exalted in the glory and the paradise of his eternal kingdom in other words the fundamental question to which all men and all women must give an answer friends I don't know any of you here this evening I don't know where you stand with the almighty and so hear this hear this clearly this evening the fundamental question to which all men and all women must give an answer is not what have you done for God it is instead what have you done with his beloved son the Lord Jesus Christ has it been to say

I'm a good person and so I really have no need or yes I believe in Jesus I believe in his cross but really the thing that's going to stand me in good stead on that day of judgment which is to come is the fact that I'm a pretty good person and I occasionally go to church on a Sunday or is it to say just as I am without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me and that thou bids me come to thee O Lamb of God I come we must recognize that without the Lord Jesus Christ we have nothing before God we stand condemned before him we are this evening under condemnation without union with the

Lord Jesus Christ and yet with him in union with Jesus Christ by his blood and his righteousness if we have peace with him then we have everything that we will ever need before God without him we are depraved we are wicked we are unable to please God in any way but in him in the Lord Jesus Christ we are forgiven by the almighty we are restored and we are equipped for a life that is worthy of his name do you see do you see why Jesus Christ really is our all in all without him we have nothing in him we have everything now just before we close this evening

I want you to notice that there is a very subtle warning here for all who have come to believe and to behold the cross of Jesus Christ and it comes to us in these verses 15 to 17 we're told that the people started bringing little infants to Jesus but when the disciples saw this they rebuked those people Jesus then said to his disciples let the children come to me and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of God now when you really stop and you think about everything that Jesus had just said to these men in this parable it's almost impossible is it not to believe that they would then act in this way I mean he just warned them about the dangers of self exaltation the dangers of having a superior attitude about the need for humility and lowliness and weakness and yet as soon as people started trying to bring these little ones into the presence of

Jesus Christ these same disciples effectively turned around and they said no no no no no no you can't get close to the Lord that's not appropriate right now we're the disciples around here we're the guys who are entitled to that privilege friends it's here we're reminded of the very real and ongoing danger of being a person who hears the truth who understands the truth who even believes the truth of all that Jesus says and yet who would so quickly betray that truth by our actions as soon as living out that truth means perhaps having a detrimental impact on our own standing within the crowd within the people there is in other words a fundamental connection between our absolute dependence on God's grace and his mercy in

[31 : 31] Christ on the one hand and then are living with humility and meekness before men on the other and yet how often isn't it true how often is that link broken in our lives because of the indwelling sin of pride and unbelief and so dear loved ones let us not miss this important warning this evening this reminder that comes to us straight from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ Jesus said blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven we must recognize that the spirit of humility and lowliness which first drove us to the cross in the first place is the same attitude it is the same demeanor that needs to be cultivated and continued all the way through our

Christian lives as someone once said the doorway into heaven is very low you do not go in with head held high and chest puffed out but you go in stooped and bowed low as you recognize that apart from him you can do nothing this is so counter cultural is it not you know the spirit of the age even sadly sometimes often in the church is one of man centeredness it's one of self exaltation it's an attitude that isn't God centered and God delighting and jealous for his glory his exaltation among the nations instead it's one where people demand their rights and say

I want I think I know I deserve but what does Jesus say everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted truly I say to you whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it James 4 verse 8 draw near to God and he will draw near to you cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you let us pray together ll o' was etti month over