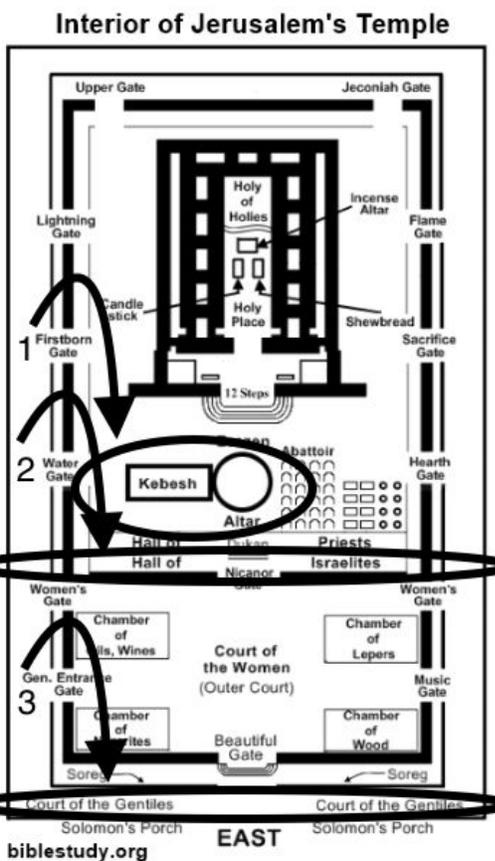


Temple geography is important.

Both men (Tax Collector and Pharisee) came from Jesus' imagination and experience. He had seen versions of them many times. *Remember, this story is a parable and not a journalist's accounting of two men praying.* I want to draw your attention to the architecture of the Jerusalem temple in order to understand some of the contours of Jesus' story. There is a lot to get lost in, but let me point out three locations that are relevant to the story.



Arrow number 1 - The Altar is the focus of the sacrificial worship system day in and day out.

Arrow number 2 - The Hall of the Israelites is probably where a righteous Pharisee would be able to stand. (Remember - parable). The Pharisee in Jesus' imagination stands close to the altar and thanks God for how great *he has made himself* and his has a privileged place near the Altar which is just one more confirmation of his excellence.

Arrow number 3 - The Court of the Gentiles is where a Jewish tax collector might have stood (even if he was a Jew). *Most tax collectors would achieve the ignominy of worse-than-a-gentile because they were considered sellouts to their hometown and nation.* This imagined tax collector is skulking on the very edge of the temple praying for God's justification, and he is the one who leaves justified while the Pharisee is unchanged.

The contrast is striking - even as the Pharisee was sitting super close to the action of the Altar, the tax collector treated the whole temple like it was a floor of lava.

The closest modern equivalent to this parable is Grace Cathedral. It would be like the spiritual journey of an Uber executive who had undid the lives of thousands of drivers and actually felt bad about it. In a moment of spiritual desperation the executive goes to Grace Cathedral on a Sunday. He never actually goes through the doors during the service - yet because he wants/ needs justification he prays for mercy. He leaves 10 mins later. In Jesus' imagination he would be more holy than all of those inside the Cathedral, thanking God for their own righteousness.

But - The Good Fella I think there is a danger in over spiritualizing the tax collector in the story as a humble saint. People like him were scoundrels and ancient versions of mobsters, who willingly shook down their neighborhood for profit. You may remember that I taught about tax farming in

December 2018...of course you do! I want to remind you of a couple of things. A tax collector was a "tax farmer." He bought a Roman tax obligation and then would begin to extract this tax (plus his own profit) from his countrymen. **The problem with this parable** is that Jesus did not tie everything up neatly. Jesus did not conclude that the tax collector would now live a virtuous and holy life after his encounter at the Temple. Jesus just leaves us hanging on what to do with the story ourselves, which I guess is a good "problem." Jesus offers no moralism about the tax collector righteously and giving up his exploitative ways. In Jesus' imagination, he might remain a character of dubious ethics.

Why would someone (Jesus) be so interested in holiness, but spend time with mobsters and use them as teaching tools? Maybe the punchline is that Jesus locates the power of *justification in God*. Neither the Pharisee, nor tax collector are the central point of the story...God's mercy is. I will touch on the Pharisee at the end, but stay with the tax collector a little longer.

Tax farmers

Most people weren't educated enough or socially connected enough to take cushy jobs, Enter the motivated tax collector who was a dynamite combination of street smarts and financial acumen. Some very entrepreneurial types would get into tax collecting, knowing they could stand to make a lot more money than they ever would if they stayed in their social lane as a farmer or fisherman. Many of us would be tax collectors too if we lived in that period - and would be grateful for the opportunity - even if we had to step on a few people (and checkout on ethics) to do it.

Tax farming in the Roman period - Rome did not want to bother with the tedium of collecting taxes, so they found motivated people to do it for them. For example, a village would be assessed as owing \$10,000. A Roman official would then sell that debt to the highest bidder. Viola - the person who put up the money was now a tax collector. As long as the collector paid back the 10K, they could demand any extra amount they could squeeze.

Last tax collector thought - The tax collector isn't so much humble in the story as desperate. He is too overwhelmed by his plight to take time to divide humanity into sides, so he settles for the spiritual efficacy of the Temple. He lurks around the edge of the Temple pondering his own great need. He stakes his hope, not on himself, but entirely on the mercy of God which is probably a good move for all of us.

Finally, the Pharisee - we would probably like him. His stereotype in that culture was not at all like ours. He was likely well behaved, well spoken, virtuous, and a delightful dinner companion. In the parable, like many real Pharisees (not all), he enjoyed the opportunity to be in the Temple. But in his good, and misplaced piety, he will leave the Temple and return to his home as "righteous" as he started. No big change of heart.

Justification The tax collector, however, will leave the Temple and go back down to his home with something new -- Justification. Justification seems to be a desire God has for all of us.

Justification is a gift. Righteousness is the result of the gift, and neither come from us. Thank God.

Todd