Deserving Hell, Receiving Heaven

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Jesus was often controversial when He taught. The story from Luke's gospel is no different, and in it we get to learn a vital lesson about the kind of person God accepts and those God rejects.

Two Men at the Temple

Jesus tells us of two men who go to pray at the temple. One is a Pharisee, a law-abiding Jew. The other is a tax collector, the kind of man who didn't obey Moses' law and was notorious for behaving badly. The Pharisee prays confidently and tells God how good he is. 'I thank you that I am not like other men.. or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' (Luke 18:11-12). Many of us would be impressed with this guy if he were part of our church!

Then the tax collector prays, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner' (v13). This man knew he would never be able to measure up to God's standard and so he cried out for mercy.

Jesus ends the parable with a bombshell: the law-breaking sinner, rather than the law-abiding Jew, ends up being the one who is accepted by God.

So why does Jesus condemn 'the good guy' rather than the sinner?

The Sin of Self-Righteousness

The answer is found in verse 14: 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.' In other words, the Pharisee trusted in himself and put his confidence in his own achievements when he came into God's presence. This sin of exalting oneself is a form of *self-righteousness*, which is dangerous to us and offensive to God.

We have to watch that we don't fall into this trap. Self-righteousness creeps in whenever you begin to congratulate yourself for your spiritual achievements. Your focus subtly shifts away from trusting in what God has done. Slowly, your self-confidence grows in what you can do. This is a religious spirit that tries to please God by keeping to the list, rather than obeying from the heart. It's focus is on following principles, rather than passionately loving and trusting the person of Jesus.

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Notice how godly the religious guy felt compared to the tax collector (who wouldn't have kept the Jewish law). One sure way to become proud is by comparing yourself to others who aren't as committed as you!

Can you identify with any of these self-righteous symptoms?

I sometimes slip into self-trust, and I have to remind myself of the basis of my salvation: the work of Jesus. Also when I pray, I try not to tell God how good I've been, but instead I thank Him for how good He is.

Those God Accepts

The people God accepts, like the tax collector, are those who know they don't deserve heaven. We actually deserve hell because of our sins, but God is so merciful that He gives us what we don't deserve. Heaven will be filled with the undeserving who will humbly boast in God's mercy and grace through Jesus.

To be clear, it is God's will for us is to live obedient lives, to tithe, and to fast from time to time (as the Pharisee did). But it flows from a heart filled with gratitude over what Jesus has done for us.