

# Jesus Observes the Pharisees

Three Parables from Luke 14 and 18

**“Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”**  
—**Luke 14:11; 18:14**

**THROUGHOUT JESUS’** earthly ministry, he was observed by the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the Jews. Their motivation for watching the Lord was most often to catch him in violation of some feature of the Mosaic Law, or with the hope of stumbling him in some way—either of which might result in his being condemned as a sinner. As these attempts failed to produce their desired results, and as Jesus’ ministry became more popular among the people, Israel’s leaders increasingly viewed him as a threat to their position. They then sought to show that he was a blasphemer of God—a sin punishable by death under the Law. They finally succeeded in gaining enough false witnesses to carry out this devious plot, and killed “The King of the Jews.”

Just as they had observed him, Jesus took the opportunity during his encounters with the Jewish religious leaders to also observe them. He noted their hypocrisy, pride, and disdain for the common people of the nation. On a number of these occasions, he took the added opportunity to speak parables to those gathered together. These were given typically to a mixed audience—those Pharisees and other leaders who opposed him, as well as his disciples and the multitudes who followed him from place to place, desiring to hear more of his message. This being the case, the parables associated with Jesus' observations of most Pharisees were designed to contrast their character, which had been corrupted by sin, with those righteous qualities God would be pleased to see developed in his chosen people.

Our opening text provides one of the key elements in this contrast, stating that anyone who seeks, by pride, to exalt himself, cannot be used of God until he is humbled—"abased." By distinction, the Master states, one who is of a humble character can be used by God, and upon proper testing and obedience, may be found worthy of being "exalted." This particular contrast—pride versus humility—is one of the central lessons in the three parables we will consider.

## **JESUS ATTENDS A FEAST**

In the opening verses of Luke 14, we are given an account of Jesus' entering the house of one of the chief Pharisees to "eat bread," evidently having been invited to do so. As he entered the abode of the Pharisee, he noted a man who was ill with the "dropsy"—bloating caused by water retention. It

was the Sabbath, and realizing that many were watching to note what he would say and do under the circumstances, Jesus asked whether or not it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath day. No one responded, and Jesus performed a miracle which healed the man ill of the dropsy. The Lord then asked, “Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?”—Luke 14:1-5

Neither the chief Pharisee, nor anyone in the house, could give Jesus a reasonable answer as to why he should not have healed the sick man on the Sabbath. (vs. 6) All of them were in the home of the Pharisee to eat, thus caring for their physical needs, so why should not Jesus do something for this man which he could not do for himself? The fact that Jesus had been invited to the house might indicate that this Pharisee, unlike most others, was somewhat favorable to the Master. This may be why the account does not record any special controversy over the question of healing the sick on the Sabbath day.

## **PARABLE OF THOSE BIDDEN**

As Jesus lingered in the home of the Pharisee, he observed that the guests were seeking the best or “chief rooms” in the house, without any regard for the host’s planned arrangements for seating. (vs. 7) This circumstance he used as the basis for a parable, recorded in verses 8-11. Using the example of a wedding feast, the parable suggested that if they were invited to such a special event, they should not sit down in the most prominent and honored seats, but wait until they were seated by

the host. This, Jesus explained, could save them and their host much embarrassment.

Jesus reminded those at the Pharisee's house that the host in the parable might well have planned for some important guest to have the more honorable seat which they had taken. If so, he would be obliged to ask them to accept a lower place. How much better it would be, Jesus explained, to take the lower place at the outset. Then, possibly, they might be invited to occupy a more honorable position. In this event, the host would rejoice that he could extend such a favor. The guest would be pleased also, and no one would be embarrassed.

Jesus drew a very practical lesson from this parable, and one that is emphasized throughout the Word of God. Quoting again the words of our opening text, he said, "Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." (vs. 11) It is important to humble ourselves before men, and before our brethren, as shown in the circumstances of this parable. However, it is even more essential that we maintain the proper spirit of humility before God. "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time."—I Pet. 5:6

## **WHOM TO INVITE**

As the dinner at the Pharisee's home progressed, Jesus made a further observation. Looking around him he probably saw that the guests were essentially from the same stratum of society as the host. They were not poor people, nor the sick. Jesus had been included because at the time he was getting much prominence in *(Continued on page 36)*

*(Continued from page 31)* Israel as a teacher. Perhaps, depending on the purity of his motives, the chief Pharisee who arranged the feast wanted his friends to learn more about this man.

Regardless of the reasons for the selection of the particular guests at this dinner—including Jesus—he took advantage of the situation, using it as a basis for a timely lesson, which he addressed directly to his host. “When thou makest a dinner or a supper,” Jesus said, “call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.”—Luke 14:12-14

A beautiful lesson is herein provided. It suggests that our benefactions should be on behalf of those who are not in a position to repay us. Such is a display of the divine quality of love. It was this quality that motivated our Heavenly Father to give his Son to die for the sins of the world. (John 1:29; 3:16) This was a costly gift to bestow, and it was presented on behalf of those—the fallen human race—who are in no position to repay.—Ps. 49:7

Jesus displayed this same quality of unselfish love. Additionally, the only ones who will have the opportunity of being with him in the spiritual phase of the kingdom will be those who are motivated to give their lives for others by the same spirit of unselfish love. Jesus said that these would receive their reward at the “resurrection of the just.” (Luke 14:14) These are the same ones who are

spoken of by Jesus as those who have “done good,” and who will come forth to a “resurrection of life.”—John 5:28,29

The record states that one of the guests in the chief Pharisee’s home who heard this statement by Jesus observed, “Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 14:15) Evidently this man was one of the devout of Israel, and who looked for the kingdom of God. He sensed that what Jesus said about being rewarded in the “resurrection of the just” would have its fulfillment in conjunction with that kingdom, and he evidently understood that this would be a blessed experience for all those who would qualify. He perhaps even entertained the hope of attaining to such a reward himself, through the grace he found to be centered in Christ Jesus.

## **PARABLE OF A GREAT SUPPER**

While still at the home of the Pharisee where he had been invited to take bread, Jesus related another parable pertaining to a feast, recorded in Luke 14:16-24. He told that “a certain man made a great supper, and bade many.” When the supper was ready and the invited guests were summoned to assemble and partake, they began to make excuses to the host’s servant as to why they could not be present. One had bought a piece of ground which he had to inspect. Another had purchased five yoke of oxen that he had to examine. Still another had married a wife and could not attend the feast.—vss. 16-20

The servant reported this situation to his master who, in turn, instructed him to go out into the streets of the city and invite others to come and

partake of the supper which had been prepared. The “poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind” were thus invited. The servant carried out these instructions, and then reported to his master that there was still room at the feast.—Luke 14:21,22

Finally, the servant was instructed to go “out into the highways and hedges, and compel”—that is, constrain or entreat—people to come to the feast, that it might be filled with guests. The master of the house had determined that none of the originally invited guests, who had made excuses for not attending the feast, would later have any opportunity to change their minds. “None of those men . . . shall taste of my supper.”—vss. 23,24

This parable, in a general way, illustrates the outworking of God’s plan for his people during the Gospel Age. The “certain man” of the parable aptly represents the Heavenly Father, who has made a great feast for his people of the present age. This supper pertains to all the good things relative to the spiritual phase of the Messianic kingdom in which the consecrated followers of the Master are invited to share. This feast is symbolically referred to in Revelation as “the marriage supper of the Lamb.”—Rev. 19:7-9

Originally, the whole Jewish nation was the Lord’s chosen people—invited guests who were given the opportunity to partake of this “great supper.” As we know from the Scriptures, however, very few of these responded to the call announcing that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17) For one reason or another, the professed Israelites of Jesus’ day made “excuse,” and were not ready for the opportunity which was then offered to them.

Beginning at Pentecost, another call went out specially to the Jewish people. Quite a number were humble and readily accepted. (Acts 2:41; 4:4) However, still there were not sufficient guests to fill the house as planned by the Lord. Then the call went to the Gentiles, and has continued to do so throughout the entire Gospel Age. In due time the Lord's predetermined number of guests for this feast will be found and made "ready," and the marriage supper of the Lamb will take place.

Following this will be another great feast, during the earthly phase of Messiah's kingdom. The Scriptures describe it as a "feast of fat things" which God has prepared for "all people, . . . fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined." It will be then that the Lord will "swallow up death in victory," and "wipe away tears from off all faces."—Isa. 25:6-9

### **PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND PUBLICAN**

The third parable of our present consideration is found in Luke 18:9-14. In this account, Luke explains that Jesus spoke this to certain ones who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." (vs. 9) The parable, as related by Jesus, concerned two men who went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other a publican. In his prayer, the Pharisee thanked the Lord that he was not like other men, such as "extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican." He then presented his own claims of righteousness to the Lord as a reason for expecting to be heard and have his prayer blessed. The publican, on the other hand, stood "afar off," and would not even lift his eyes toward heaven.

Rather, beating himself upon his breast, he said, "God be merciful to me a sinner."—Luke 18:10-13

Jesus surely chose appropriate examples to illustrate the point of the parable. The Pharisees were indeed a mostly self-righteous group of people. However, this self-righteousness was not pleasing to the Heavenly Father, and it was clearly recognized by Jesus. Near the end of his earthly ministry, we find a series of woes pronounced upon this class by the Lord, and the reasons set forth as to why they were not approved by God. These reasons were, for the most part, their pretensions of righteousness and outward displays of goodness, which were designed to impress the rank and file of the people.—Matt. 23:13-33

The Master was not deceived by these. He knew their real heart condition, and recognized that they were not the sort of people whom the Heavenly Father could use in connection with the work of the new Gospel Age which was about to open. They were to be cast off from the high position of representing the Lord, and Jesus' own humble and true followers were to take their place.—chap. 21:43

Just before presenting this excoriating description of the Pharisees, Jesus gave some wholesome instruction to his disciples. For the time being they were to observe and do what was bidden them by the scribes and Pharisees, for at that time these were still sitting in "Moses' seat." They were to be obedient to the Pharisees, even though they knew that "all their works they do for to be seen of men."—chap. 23:1-7

The disciples, however, were not to copy the example of the scribes and Pharisees. "Be not ye

called Rabbi,” Jesus said to his disciples, “for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.” To this Jesus added, “Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”—vss. 8-12

## **THE PUBLICANS**

The publicans of Jesus’ day were in quite a different category, and were looked down upon by the scribes and Pharisees, and even by the Jewish people as a whole. They were mostly tax and toll collectors, working as agents of the Roman government. The Jews resented paying tribute to anyone. The fact that some of their own people were participating in making collections, operating under a system that offered many opportunities to engage in fraud and exploitation, caused the Israelites to look especially upon the publicans as sinners, and even traitors.

However, there were individuals among the publicans who were not happy with their lot. In any group, there are usually individuals who are not in sympathy with the principles for which the majority stand. Nicodemus was a worthy example of this among the Pharisees. (John 3:1) Matthew, chosen by Jesus to be one of his twelve apostles, was a good example with respect to the publicans. The message of John the Baptist appealed to many of the publicans, and they repented of their wrongdoings.—Luke 3:2,3,12,13

Thus, in the parable under discussion Jesus chose a repentant publican to illustrate the true attitude of those who recognize that they are indeed sinners, and who manifest the proper attitude of mind and heart in their desire to seek the Heavenly Father and be assured of his blessing. The publican was a sinner, but the positive fact in his case was that he was sufficiently honest of heart to admit it. His repentance was to such an extent that he cast himself upon the Lord, asking for mercy. It was very much like a criminal who pleads guilty to the charge against him, and looks to the court for mercy and compassion. As far as God was concerned, the Pharisee in the parable was just as guilty as the publican. However, he remained proud of heart, and sought the Lord's blessing upon the basis of his professed righteousness.

Jesus leaves no doubt as to which one of these men in the parable represents those with whom God is pleased. He said, "I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other," and reiterating once again the words of our opening text, that anyone who "exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."—Luke 18:14

The important lesson here is that in order to be exalted by God and have his blessings bestowed upon us, it is essential to humble ourselves before him. The specific point of humility stressed in the parable is the acknowledgment of sins and recognition of our need of the Lord's mercy. This attitude is essential when we devote ourselves to the Heavenly Father in consecration, and it must be

maintained throughout our walk in the narrow way if we desire to be assured of his continued blessing.

This true spirit of humility is, first of all, before God. If we are sincere in our humility before him we will, in the natural course of events, be humble before the brethren, and all with whom we come in contact. We will not be seeking the chief seats at the feasts, as it were. We will not be endeavoring to promote ourselves among the brethren, nor by displays of professed wisdom seek to draw away disciples after ourselves. We will also steer clear of criticism of others who our sinful flesh might perceive as merely “publicans.” We will remember Jesus’ words that “one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren”—not by our own merit but by his, not by our own righteousness but because of the tender mercy of our Heavenly Father.—Matt. 23:8

## **JUSTIFIED**

Jesus said that the publican in the parable “went down to his house justified.” This is an interesting use of the word “justified.” The Scriptures speak of our being justified by faith, and through the blood of Christ, but neither of these is mentioned in the parable.—Rom. 5:1,2,8,9,18

However, since the parable is based upon situations which existed in Israel at the time of Jesus’ ministry, and prior to his death, we might think of this publican as being in a similar position as those reached by the ministry of John the Baptist. John’s message to the Jewish people was one of repentance and a return to the principles enunciated

in the Mosaic Law. Doing so placed them in a position of having a heart prepared to exercise faith in the blood of Christ when the due time came. Prior to Jesus' death and resurrection they did not receive what Paul described as justification to life, but they did receive the assurance of God's blessing and of his willingness to accept them into the arrangements of the new age once it would begin.

In the lesson pictured by the parable we might think of those represented by the Pharisee as those who, when John the Baptist—and then Jesus—appeared to them, proved unworthy, and were cast off from the special favors of the Gospel age. Similarly, we might regard the publican as denoting those who recognized their sins, and repented. There were many such under the preaching of John the Baptist, and others later as Jesus taught. These were the ones among Israel who were brought into the Gospel Age fold. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, they were given the opportunity of entering into the narrow way and running for the mark of the prize of the High Calling of God, "justified" through the blood of Christ Jesus.

As we strive to fulfill our vows of consecration, let us daily apply the important lessons of these parables to ourselves as followers of the Master. As we have noted, one of these essential principles is that those who seek to exalt themselves shall be abased, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted. Let us, therefore, humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he might exalt us in due time! ■