

LUKE 18:9-14  
TOTAL DEPENDENCE

Have you seen this guy? He's a brilliant piece of advertising! His name is Aleksandr Orlov, a meerkat whose family began life on the streets of Moscow and grew a successful business called [www.comparethemeerkat.com](http://www.comparethemeerkat.com). There are 3 videos made to tell the story of Aleksandr and his family and how they began life as poor meerkats in Russia to have successful business careers now. They have become famous in their own right now and whoever thought of this as an advertising ploy deserves every reward they get; it is brilliant. It is used to advertise car insurance! I don't really care about the car insurance site, but the adverts are very funny and engaging and at least one person in Juniper Green has a model of Aleksandr!

The whole tenor of the website Aleksandr advertises is comparison. [www.comparethemarket.com](http://www.comparethemarket.com) allows you to look for cheap car insurance by comparing one company against lots of others; you can compare not only the price for insurance, but what benefits each company will give you for your money. So, by comparing one against the others you find a deal that suits you best. Then, there are other insurance companies who will tell you that they are not to be found on any comparison sites and for them that is meant to make you think better of them; 'we don't cheapen ourselves by this comparison exercise' which of course is a comparison exercise in itself!

The whole ethos of these comparison websites taps into something innate in human nature – the desire to be better than other people. There is a competitive instinct in human nature that wants to win, that wants to be better than everyone else. We dress it up in a way that suggests this is simply fulfilling our potential and being the best that we can be, but really that is only covering up reality: we just want to be better than other people. Sport taps into that instinct too – the desire to win, the desire to be better than other people is the essence of competition. Unchecked, this instinct is a disaster for our relationships with other people: if we're always looking at other people for ways in which we can get one-up on them, then there is no real basis for love and friendship there; if life is one big competition, then support and encouragement and compassion will always take second place to the quest for one-up-manship!

Sadly, the Church is infected with this ethos too at times. Have you ever heard someone describe themselves as a 'real Christian'? The only point of that phrase is to compare ourselves with others whom we obviously feel are not! Or there are people who give the impression, if not actually say, of knowing more Bible than anybody else and who have opinions that are more biblical than anyone else or more godly. Sometimes it is even simpler than that: we simply think of ourselves as better human beings than others in Church and we take every opportunity to let anyone who will listen know that; we do people down at every turn by snide remarks and seemingly throw-away comments. It all comes from this innate human desire to be better than other people and to be seen to be better than others. This is a disaster for the Church when allowed to run unchecked because it leaves no place for love and compassion.

Not many of Jesus' parables have a specific target-audience. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector does. Luke tells us who is this target-audience: "*To some...*" (v9) There are two areas of concern there and both spring from the same place: first of all, there are people who are self-righteous, confident in themselves and that has distorted their relationship with God; secondly, there are people who look down on other people, who compare themselves to others and always come out

on top. These two attitudes spring from a sense of spiritual pride, that 'I can manage on my own and I can do it better than these other people.' There is no escape from that sense; this is Jesus' concern and this is heart of this little parable.

The scene: the temple. Two men are going to the temple to pray. The first is the Pharisee, the religious leader, an important man; we tend to see them as the villains of the piece and their part in death of Jesus bears some of that out; but in many ways they might also be seen as heroes in Israel: they treated the Scriptures seriously, they studied their Bibles endlessly and tried to live by what they read there; they were determined to do God's will in every area of their life; if anyone was going to be saved it was surely them! The other man is a tax-collector, a traitor to the nation, a collaborator with the occupying army of the Romans; a greedy man and the thief who made himself rich at others' expense! There are so many reasons for people to hate him. These two men go to the temple to pray and Jesus allows us to listen in to their prayer as He tells the story.

First, we hear the Pharisee pray: "*The Pharisee...*" (v11,12) He had a list of achievements to spell out to God; God is bound to approve and look on him with favour! But his first achievement is to be not like others; this echoes the classic Jewish prayer that rejoiced in the fact that the Jew was neither a woman, a Gentile nor a slave. He is not like these other people and some are listed: robbers, evildoers, adulterers and *this tax-collector!* You have to say it with a sneer in your voice to get the right effect; he is looking down his nose at the man he sees across the temple floor. Then he lists his other achievements: "*I fast...*" (v12) The standard by which the Pharisee measures himself is to look downwards at other people, including the tax collector and so by that standard he is almost bound to look well and to come out on top and so we see his pride coming out by running other people down and by boasting about his own spiritual achievements. "*Confident...*" (v9) "He glances at God but contemplates himself." (Plummer)

Then we hear the tax collector pray. what does his body language tell us first? He "*stood at ...*" (v13) It tells me that here is a man who is not sure that he really belongs in this place of prayer; he is not sure that God will even hear his prayer; it tells me that here is a man deeply troubled as he beats his breast and that he is dealing solely with what is on his mind and heart. Then we find out what that is: "*God have...*" (v13) He is aware only of his faults and failings and mistakes; he measures himself by God and what God expects and knows that he has nothing to commend him to God; his simple prayer is for mercy and forgiveness. He is aware of his sin, he knows that he has let God down and appeals to God to be merciful to him; he has no other prayer; he has no other hope!

How astonishing is the way Jesus ends the parable?! What did we expect at the start? The Pharisee, the hero, the devoted man, the committed one who is determined to obey God – surely he will be one God blesses. The tax-collector has no chance. "*I tell you...*" (v14) Jesus turns the world upside down! The world tells us that pride in your achievements is good; being humble is bad because it allows other people to trample all over you! Jesus says the humble person is blessed by God and the proud person goes away empty-handed! It was the humble tax-collector, expressing his total humble dependence on God for mercy, whose prayer was heard; he was the man who went home blessed, justified; he'd come, only aware of his faults and weaknesses and God give him what he sought – mercy and forgiveness.

There are two things to say:

**1)the real danger of spiritual pride:** people tell me 'I go to church twice on Sunday, attend the prayer meeting, the bible study and everything else I can go to'; or 'I've

been nice to my neighbours, and kind to animals' and the implication behind the way in which these were said was 'God will need to be good to me!' They were looking only at themselves and measuring themselves by their own sense of goodness and all that was there was a sense of pride in these achievements. 'Look at me and what I've done; how good, how spiritual am I; I'm much better than these others'. Let that run in our hearts, then love and compassion for others will disappear; equally the sense of faith, trust, dependence on God will disappear; pride says we can manage on our own!

**2)God blesses the humble person:** in complete contrast, I've also met people who have no sense of their own worth and value at all, who are completely humble in their attitude to other people and to God. In our relationships with other people, we recognise our needs and so become aware of the needs of others, the feelings of others, sensitive to others and treat other people with grace and compassion. In our relationship with God, there is a sense of complete dependence because we know that all we have comes from God; we are what we are because of what God has done for us; salvation depends completely and utterly on what God has done for us in Christ – *Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on thee... false and full of sin I am, Thou art full of truth and grace.* (Hymn 490)

What then do we make of these words of Paul? "*I have...*" (2 Tim 4:7f) Do these not convey pride and self-congratulation? Well, this is the same man who also wrote about himself as '*the chief of sinners*' and who said "*by the...*" (1 Cor 15:10) Everything he has, all that he has achieved has been because of God's grace. Here's the wonderful balance: a sense of delight and fulfilment in his life and ministry; he has reached the end of the course, he has done all that God called him to do and we applaud that delight and fulfilment. But he knows that he has done all this only because of God's grace, only because of what God has done for him in Christ. There is no pride, no arrogance, no looking down on others with notion that he, Paul, is better; he has only humble dependence on God for everything, for faith, life, ministry, forgiveness, hope, peace and God has not disappointed him; a crown waits as a reward for the humble servant!

Pride distorts our relationship with God – it takes away faith and dependence. Pride distorts our relationships with other people – we look down on people we consider to be inferior! Jesus turns the world upside down: God blesses the humble and really blesses the humble: He answers the humble person's prayers, He rewards with a crown; being humble we trust God completely; being humble we care for others with love and compassion; "*he who...*" (v14)