

The Two Sides of Self-Centeredness

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Everyone is self-centered from time-to-time. In [Luke 18:9-14](#), Jesus told a story of two men who reflect two main sides of self-centeredness: a Pharisee and a tax collector. But what are these two sides of self-centeredness, and how can each of us fall into them?

The Pharisee

The [Pharisee](#) in [Luke 18:9-14](#), even though he talks about honoring God, doesn't really believe he needs God. He thinks he has it all figured out. Nowadays, we don't have Pharisees, but we do have pharisaism. These aren't just people who are very involved at church – that's not bad. It's the people who are very involved and think they're justified on that basis or that they're holier than others on that basis – pride. If that's the case, then they are like the Pharisee in this story, and we know God is not okay with this:

▮ [Proverbs 3:34 \(NIV\)](#) He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.

The Tax Collector

We can be self-centered as “tax collectors,” too. We can become so focused on our sins, shortcomings, and failures that we refuse the grace of God, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins, and the help of other Christians. We choose to wallow in self-pity and false humility – which is actually pride in disguise – beating ourselves up and proclaiming over and over that we are just so unworthy. The Apostle Paul condemned this sort of attitude in [Colossian 2:16-23](#).

We Must Turn Outward to God, Not Inward to Ourselves

The problem with both of these mindsets is that our focus is on ourselves, not on God and what he has done for us. Whether we think we're good enough for God and are sort of doing him a favor, or whether we are so wracked with self-pity that we would never look to God, we are, in both cases, focusing on ourselves instead of on him.

The tax collector in Jesus's parable is a good example of true humility. He doesn't stay in a place of shame, but instead truly seeks God's forgiveness and receives it on the basis of his true humility and repentance.

Where Do You Stand?

Where are you on the spectrum of Pharisee and tax collector? We can all gravitate toward shame and self-loathing or toward self-righteousness and pride. Regardless of which direction you lean, it's crucial that you humble yourself before God and recognize that though we will never be enough, Jesus will never *not* be enough.

Talk About It

1. *What is your initial reaction to this topic? What jumped out at you?*
2. *On the scale of “Pharisee to tax collector,” where would you say you lie when it comes to pride? Why do you place yourself here on the scale?*
3. *What are some examples of pharisaism you’ve seen in your own life, either in your behavior or in the behavior of others?*
4. *Read Proverbs 3:34. Why do you think God “mocks” the proud but shows grace to the humble?*
5. *What are some examples of people you’ve seen who wallow in self-pity and refuse God’s grace on that basis? Have you ever behaved this way? Explain.*
6. *Read Colossians 2:16-23. What do these verses teach us about being a “tax collector.”*
7. *Both “Pharisees” and pitiful “tax collectors” are self-focused. What must a Pharisee do to have the right kind of humility and become more God-focused?*
8. *What must a pitiful tax collector do to have the right kind of humility and become more God-focused?*
9. *What steps must you take to have the right kind of humility and become more God-focused?*
10. *Write a personal action step based on this conversation.*