

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

(Luke 18:9-14)



Pharisee and Publican mosaic, Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (Italy), 6th century

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Artistic Illumination

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (or, Publican) has not been a popular subject for artists over the centuries. One presumes this is because of the absence of any real dramatic action in the story and thus most of the meaning of this parable is felt inwardly, which is difficult to depict visually in any profound way. This makes the illustration of the parable far less interesting than, say, the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the parable of the Wicked Tenants. Artists, who have taken the parable, have resorted to giving us “just the facts” as a reminder. What commentary they offered was done in non-obvious ways, in terms of position within the picture and through posture.

For instance, many show the Pharisee kneeling in a very upright posture, or even standing. Most frequently his hands are shown in the traditional open-armed “orans” prayer posture which is common to many religions. The tax collector, on the other hand, is most frequently shown kneeling or even prostrate, especially in the earlier centuries. His eyes, even his entire body, are downcast, unable to look directly at the tabernacle. His hands are frequently clasped in prayer. In short, his entire being is focused on his sorrow before God as he pleads for mercy.



An illumination from a Byzantine manuscript depicting the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, Codex 93, folio 127.v. Byzantine. 12th century.

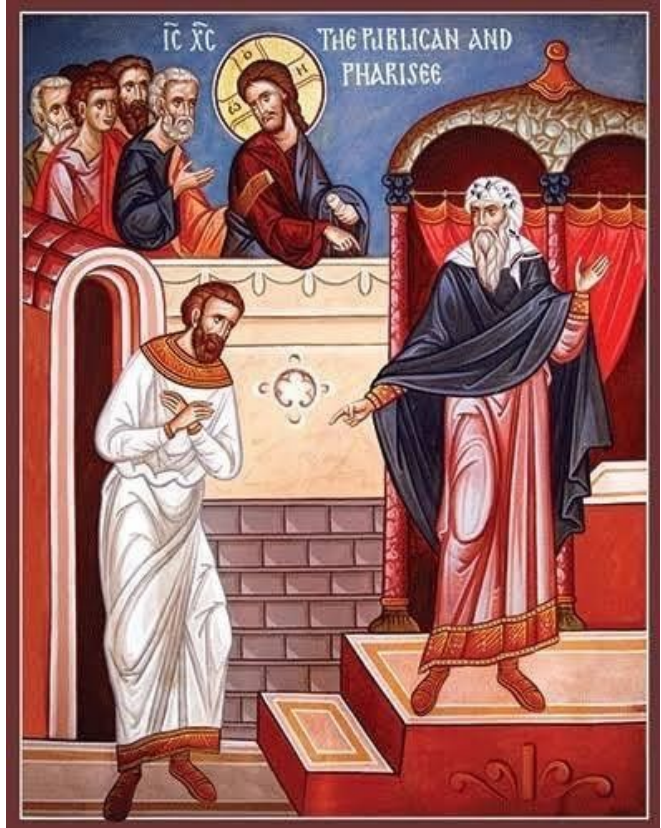


The Pharisee and the Tax Collector, From a Picture Bible, French (St Omer), c1190-1200

While not as common in the West, the Parable has been an important subject of iconography among the Eastern Orthodox churches, which have depicted the contrast in piety in a variety of imitated tropes:



Fresco Depicting the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, 1682 Fresco Kaisariani Monastery Athens Greece



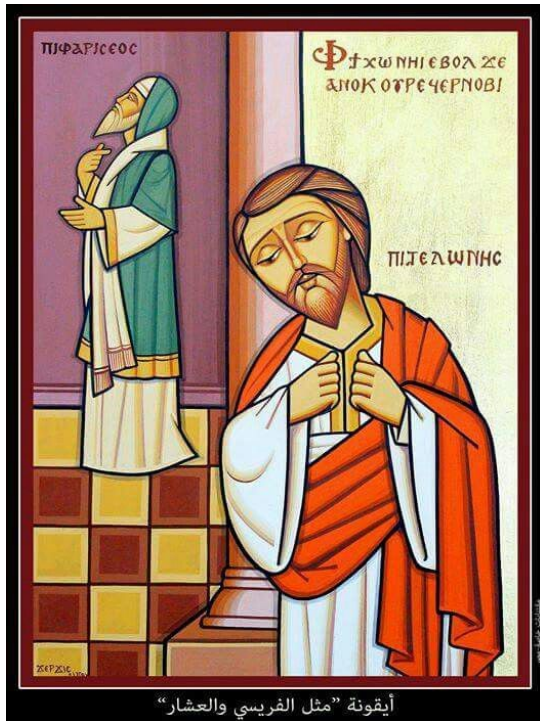


The icon of the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee shows both men in the manner in which they enter the temple to pray. The Pharisee goes to a very prominent place where others will see him. The positions of his hands indicate that he is addressing God by speaking of his stature and accomplishments. In contrast, the Publican enters and remains in a low place, far from the holiest parts of the temple. His posture shows his openness to God, his humility, and his petition for mercy.

The icon also shows the state of both men as they leave the temple. Following the words of Christ in Luke 18:14, the Publican has now been exalted in the kingdom of God because of his humility. He leaves the temple forgiven, and he shows that he remains open to the will of God. In contrast, the Pharisee leaves the temple unjustified, still in need of forgiveness. Because of his pride and lack of repentance, he will be humbled before God, the One who knows the condition of each person's soul and who will offer the gift of salvation to those who come to Him in true repentance.



Nelly Bube (Kazakhstanian, 1949-), *The Parable of the Self Righteous and the Truly Righteous*



Gerges Samir, Contemporary Coptic Icon (21st century)

In Western art, it was not uncommon to depict the spiritual and moral distance between the two pray-ers through the use of physical distance between the two figures in the portraiture. Sometimes, the Pharisee is at a far distance, close to an altar with the Publican in the foreground. Other times, it is the Pharisee who is in the distance, sometimes barely even visible.



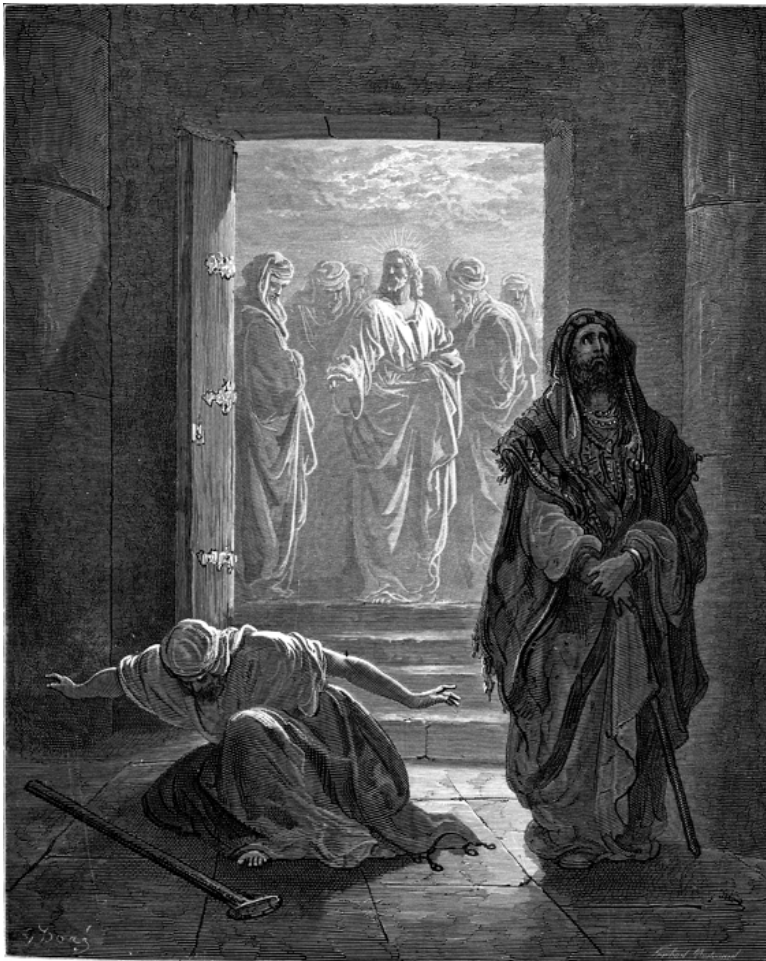
Master Freser (German), *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, c1688



Cosmas Damian Asam (German, 1686-1739), *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, 1732



Anon, af Adriaen Collaert, af Lucas and Joannes van Doetechum, af Maeten de Vos_Dutch, *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, 1643, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Gustave Dore' (1832-1883) *Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

Here the parable is illustrated interestingly as a scene seen through a door, with the doorway serving as a visual “door” into the narrative world created by Jesus who stands just on the other side of the door.



Barent Fabritius (Dutch, 1624-1673), *The Pharisee and The Tax Collector*, 1661

Here the parable is shown in three scenes. In the middle the Pharisee is kneeling, praying in a manner to be seen by all, while the publican (tax collector) is behind a pillar, praying silently and beating his chest. On the left the haughty Pharisee leaves the temple with a devil, while on the right the publican leaves the temple with an angel. Fabritius emphasizes the arrogance of the Pharisee by using bold colors for his robe and using lighter, more humble colors for the robe of the publican.



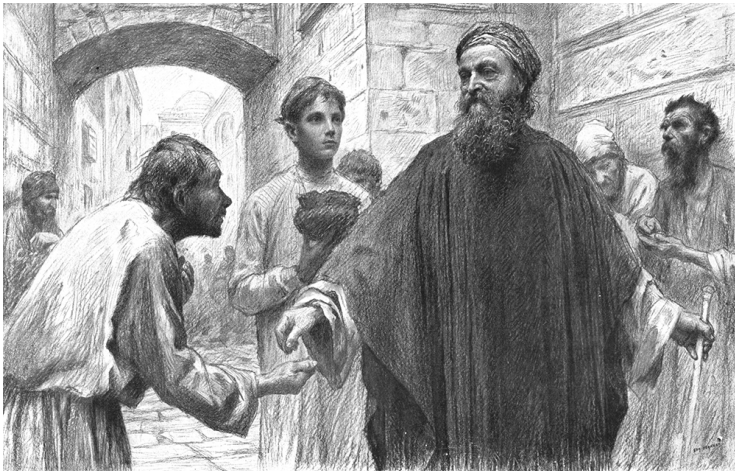
Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (German, 1794-1872), *The Pharisee and the Publican*



Contemporary Icon after the fashion of Carolsfeld's engraving

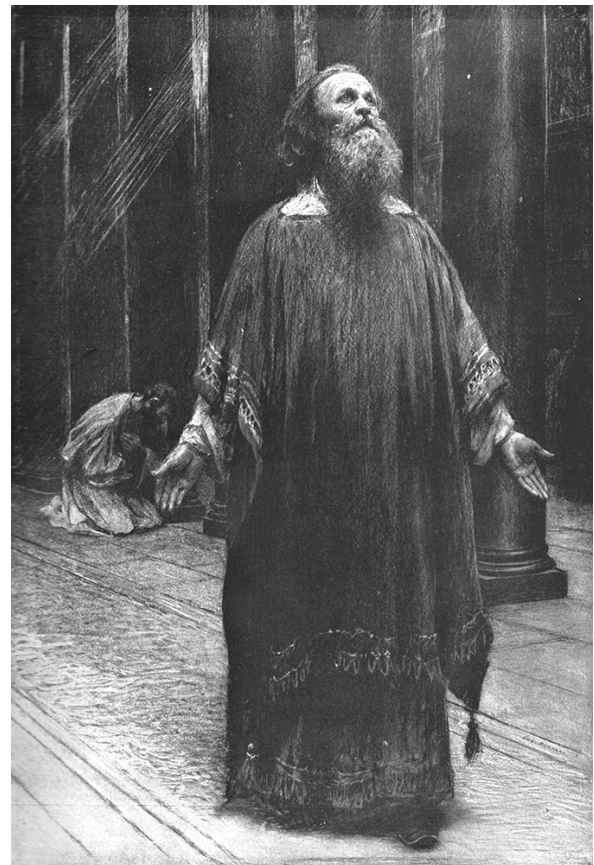


Le Pharisien et le Publicain, engraving, printed by Emile Petithenry, Bonne Presse



Eugene Burnand (Swiss, 1850-1921), *Pharisee and the Tax collector*, 1899, part of a series of paintings on the parable, published in 1908.

Both illustrations show the Pharisee's public piety. Only in the second is the Publican depicted, though only in the background. On both accounts, the scenes depict the *Pharisee's* perception of the world.





After Sir John Everett Millais (English), *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, 1864

As a variation of the visual distancing above, the artists of these three works highlight the distinction between the Pharisee and Publican by use of a pillar, which serves as a symbolic wall, behind which the Publican hides or against which he leans.



“Pharisee and the Publican,” from *Perceptive Illustrations of the Bible*, The LIFE Picture Collection

James Tissot (French, 1836-1902), *The Pharisee and The Tax Collector*, 1886-94





Robert T. Barrett (American, 1949-),
The Pharisee and the Publican



Jesus Mafa, *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, Cameroon, 1973



James Brenan (1837-1907), Publican and Pharisee, 1858



James Christensen, "The Pharisee and the Publican," *Parables* (detail), 1999

Here, the artist visually contrasts the external richness of the Pharisee by use of bold color and grandiose gestures. The spiritual richness of the publican is hidden in his somber colors and restrained prayer.



Bryn Gillette, *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, 2012

In the artist's own words: "I tried to paint this familiar scene from the more shocking spiritual lens of what was happening within the two figures: the Pharisee's self righteous posture emanating darkness, spiritually dead but covered by a veneer of beautiful color, while the tax collector is contrite in posture, full of life, covered in humble earth tones, and shimmering with God's anointing."



Harold Copping (1863-1932), *The Pharisee and the Publican*



Peter Gallen, *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*,
(*Der Pharisäer und der Zöllner*)

I confess I have no insights into the symbolic meaning of Pollock's work here. What do you make of it?



Ian Pollock (Irish, 1950-), *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, 2000