

Two Sides to a Story
(Reference Luke 18:9-14)



Jesus' disciples had dispersed for a welcome break following a busy morning at the synagogue in Nain. Jesus had gone by himself to visit friends who farmed on the lower slopes of Mount Tabor. Nathanael and Philip, well established friends, had walked some of the way with him and had now found a sheltered place beside a running stream among sycamore trees. Philip opened his bag to share a snack of bread and figs. Philip was originally a man of the sea, whereas Nathanael, the quiet, deep thinking teacher was at home here among green fields, not far from his beloved Cana. He loved this place with its magnificent view of Mount Tabor, especially at this time of year surrounded by a sea of green fields. He loved it even more since young John had confided in him an experience he and his brother James and Simon had had on the mountain with Jesus. John had to tell someone, even though Jesus had asked them not to. Nathanael was the obvious choice. He was not a man to betray a friend. He was glad John had confided in him. The three had been with Jesus, near to the summit. John described what happened as a glorious, incredible but frightening experience. It seemed, just briefly while they prayed, heaven and earth met in him - in Jesus - and they caught glimpses of what they assumed to be Moses and Elijah talking with him. Nathanael could imagine the scene and wished he had been with them. He had felt sure from early in their friendship that Jesus possessed more than a little of the Spirit of God. He believed this man to be a true son of God. Nathanael understood the Master's wishes for secrecy at this time. There was no way he could share the story with Philip. His friend was of an enquiring mind and often too ready to voice his thoughts with embarrassing questions.

Philip rose from the ground, stood and stretched. A tall, slim muscular man of fishermen stock, he had a restless nature like the sea.

Oh, sit down, Nathanael told him. We'll be here for a while yet. I think the Master may stay all night.

Philip ignored the command. *What did you think of the Master's story this morning? The one about a Pharisee and Taxman in the Temple? I expect you saw the Pharisees in the crowd. They're everywhere!* There was scorn in Philip's

voice. *They're in every town and village. The synagogues are riddled with them. Jesus was right, when he intimated they're puffed up with their own pride. They are always looking down their noses at the likes of us.*

They're not all like that. Nathanael reasoned quietly, looking up at Philip. Some of them genuinely believe they are chosen by God to ensure the purity of his people. They believe we shall only have strength to resist Rome's power if we're right with God. Only then, they say, will we be sure of a victory against all comers. That idea's not so different from what Jesus teaches in many ways, except that the Pharisees express it in a different way. His Kingdom starts with people right with God. But the Pharisees want their petty rules kept more than they want ordinary people to change their lives. That's why John Baptist upset them. He wanted everyone to start with repentance and baptism leading to a new way of life - Jesus' kingdom life.

Philip sat down again. *Pharisees just keep themselves apart. They think they're so much better. He looked at his open hands. They despise the likes of us Galilee folk whose hands are stained with fish-guts!*

Nathanael laughed. *The fact is the Master wants new people too, but he certainly doesn't want them all chained to petty rules. His Kingdom isn't like that.*

Did you see old Reuben? Philip interjected. *He's out from Jerusalem again. There were quite a few others with him. They're like a network of spies, checking up on us and especially on Jesus. They're going to make trouble for him before long.*

Nathanael sighed. *I'm sure he knows that. This morning's story won't help. At least it stopped their questions. They would imagine the first to speak would be identifying himself with the Pharisee in the story*

Do you think he really had Reuben in mind? asked Philip
Maybe, Philip.

Nathanael paused. He pointed to a solitary cloud from the West passing high above the mountain. He checked himself from saying, *That must have been how it was when Jesus was up there in his glory.*

Philip looked for a moment then resumed the conversation. *I couldn't help wondering how Matthew took that story. Jesus used the usual saying 'tax gatherers and sinners and prostitutes and rogues, lumping them all together. It can't be easy for him.*

But Matthew isn't a taxman anymore Nathanael informed him. *He has a new job as secretary/ book-keeper for Elias on his estate at Bethsaida. But then I know. You're right. Some of those Pharisees class all of us the same. He grinned, 'Sinners All'*

And especially me.

They turned their heads. Neither had been aware of Matthew's approach through the trees minutes earlier.

Philip was immediately apologetic. *Doesn't it bother you and your old friends when even Jesus classed you with drunkards, sinners and thieves?*

You were not looking in the right place! Matthew laughed at Philip's expression. It was a very deep laugh for such a small man. *If you had been looking at the Master instead of at Reuben, you would have seen him wink at me. I don't think Reuben got a wink! Most of the Pharisees lack a sense of humour. Holy people don't laugh much! I'd got used to slanderous words in my job. What most people don't understand is that taxmen are not all rogues and some Pharisees are really kind, deeply spiritual people. Even prostitutes know something about love! Jesus knows that and that's what makes his teaching different. Not just his comic stories but the fact that he knows people. Individual people come first with him.*

Matthew enthused about the subject. His experience had taught him there were two ways to look at it. Just as people hated giving taxes but were happy to receive the benefits.

A Taxman and a Pharisee have a lot in common, he went on. Nearly everyone hates both of us! That's the way life is! I was given the chance of learning my letters and numbers but there's not a lot to be made by writing and counting in Bethsaida or Capernaum.

He looked at Philip, laughter in his sharp eyes, *I wasn't going to be a fisherman. Can't stand the smell of fish. Give me roast lamb any day! I had a family to provide for and tax collecting suited me, whatever people said about me working for the Romans. I confess we did cheat a bit. We had to. The bosses expected it. I gave most of my extra away. A lot of us do.*

However, I've got a new life now - ever since that day I went home a changed man. I can live with myself, thanks to the Master coming to enlist me. I've been thinking. He laughed. *I think the Romans may have to collect their own taxes soon. I've been talking to that little fellow Zacchaeus over in Jericho. He was my old boss. I think Zacc may be joining us soon. I've had a word with the Master about him. I went to see him because I'd started to think that now I'm Jesus' man I'm looking down at Zacc - just like the Pharisee in Jesus' story!*