What Threatens a Leader’s Leadership?

An Exegetical Analysis of Luke 18:9-14

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the exegetical analysis of Luke 18:9-14 in favor of understanding the principal risk that threatens every leader’s leadership—egotism. Egotism or selfishness is identified as the biggest danger to leaders and self-glorification is recognized as the source of that risk in the selected pericope for this study. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector reveals a wide gap between God’s system of ordeal and human’s policy of judgment. Meanwhile, it provides a reminder of the need for paradigm shift in conventional religious thought and thereby ordinary assumptions about moral individuals and their leadership. Socio-rhetorical criticism is taken as an approach to explore textual, social, cultural and ideological aspects of the studied pericope.

*Keywords:* Egotism, Humility, Leadership, Luke 18
Introduction

Humility is the missing quality in leaders today—far too many are self-promoting, or competitive or pompous even. One might think that for someone to claim to be humble is an arrogant act, but the life and work of Jesus reported in the New Testament are self-assertive cases of modesty. The statement in Luke 18: 14 “… for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” reaffirms the requirement of meekness in leaders—a growing need in many self-glorified leaders.

The Biblical worldview encourages morality at individual and social levels, but at the same time warns about the vulnerabilities that could be caused by egotism. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector bears a strong message of God’s policy of judging humans’ behaviors. His response to a sinner’s plea for mercy is beyond humans’ conventional religious thought and expectation. In fact, the pericope is a representation of the necessity of a basic change in surficial assumptions usually made about an individual’s justification.

The theological theme of selected pericope reminds the fact that God is free to respond to a sinner’s plea for mercy with his own rules and ways of justification. God’s mind is beyond humans’ simple religious or moral understandings. People commonly expect to find sinners in the hell and religious individuals in the heaven, but God’s mindset works amazingly beyond their expectation. Jesus has already warned about such simplistic views (Luke 20:46-47). He uses the parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector to reflect his concern about surficial judgments that are usually made based on egotism.

Robbins (1996) describes hermeneutical process as a four-layered texture: (a) inner texture that describes the material’s subtext, (b) inter-texture that describes the material’s interaction with other texts, (c) social and cultural texture that describes the contemporary context of the passage, and (d) ideological texture that describes the underlying lessons of a
text (p. 21). It is an approach that serves the objective of applying theological themes in the context of leadership. This analysis follows that approach (See figure 1).

![Figure 1. Adapted from The tapestry of early Christian discourse: Rhetoric, society, and ideology by Vernon K. Robbins (1996, p. 21)](image)

The chosen text is studied through historical, social, cultural, and theological references for a better understanding. The analysis is supported by a series of verses in the Bible denouncing egotism and complimenting humility. The output of this analysis, especially as a cross-context analysis (repetitive, progressive, argumentative, and sensory-aesthetic) is the identification of the most decisive factor in shaping ethical leadership: humility.

(a) Inner Texture

According to Robbins (1996, p. 22), interpreters believe that the inner texture of a narrative text holds a narrator who tells the story and characters who think, act and have their presence in the story. He thinks that socio-rhetorical criticism encourages interpreter to consider the inner texture of a text, in order to investigate inner phenomena in the text.
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Regarding authors and readers as “objects” or “subjects,” Robbins reasons that the goal of socio-rhetorical criticism is to approach people as interactive subjects-objects (p. 28). In his view, the inner texture of a text concerns communication between author, the narrator and the characters who work together. Briefly, the process of communication begins with real author then goes to implied author, inner texture, narrator and characters, implied reader and finally to real reader or audience.

The inner texture analysis of Luke 18:9-14 shows three persons working in the story: God, Tax Collector and the Pharisee. The genre of text is a parable. The Pharisee’s prayer is really a review of his moral resume, directed both at advertising his own righteousness and exposing the perversion of the Tax Collector, whom he actually mentions in his prayer, the latter option seems preferable. Osborn takes the pericope as a case of reversal of expectation. He writes, “Pharisee’s self-centered prayer is rejected and the Tax Collector’s plea for mercy was accepted” (2006, p. 242).

Kreider (1986) believes that “this parable holds a trap that is at once obvious and precarious. The mention of the Pharisees, for most readers of the New Testament, sets the caveat. Whether rightly or wrongly, the caricature of the Pharisee often developed out of the New Testament is that of someone whose religious aspirations turned in upon oneself so that commitment to the tradition, however genuinely motivated, ended in hypocrisy. So, when the Pharisee enters the scene, one is served notice that something must be looked at with scrutiny” (p. 458).

According to Osborn (2006, p. 242), the reader begins with a study or close reading of the text itself, looking for narrative flow and getting a preliminary idea of plot. The inner texture analysis of Tax Collector’s behavior in Luke 18:9-14 reveals three steps taken towards the kingdom of God. He cries out and prays to God (step 1). This is a reflection of
his humility (step 2). That humility likens him to a child (step 3), who ultimately finds his way into the kingdom of God. The third step is a reminder of what Jesus said later, “I tell you the truth, anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18: 17).

McCabe (2008) uses the inner textual aspect of Christ’s model of leadership and suggests, “continued research will show the final stage of moral development, assuming that is the goal, is only achievable through the same humble and obedient nature which the Apostle describes as the nature of Christ (Phil 2:5-11)” (p. 43). That is a mark of humility.

(b) Intertexture

Intertexture analysis enables the reader to identify unique layers within the text. The pericope is chosen because of its illuminating role in reminding the menace of egotism for leaders. Robbins refers to intertexture analysis as the “second arena” of his approach (p. 96). He believes that “the interpreter works in the area between the author and the text, not between the text and the reader” (p. 96). Intertexture analysis examines the interfaces between the studied text and outside the text. This includes other texts, oral traditions (oral-scribal intertexture), historical context, social norms, and culture.

Oral-scribal Intertexture

Based on Robbins’ framework, Oginde (2011, p. 28) reminds that the analysis of oral–scribal intertexture includes recitation, re-contextualization, and reconfiguration of other texts, both orally and scribally, in the foreground of the text.

The Pharisee’s prayer started out as a thanksgiving psalm to God, but the praise ended up not being about God. A comparison between the pericope and a number of verses highlights humility as the positive reflection of morality. The cited verses in table 1 are examples of oration that clarify the main theme of pericope. The following table shows the
points of comparison that provide an oral ground for the oral-scribal intertexture of Luke 18:9-14. It briefs verses throughout the Old and New Testaments around the concept of humility and its consequences for the humble individual.

*Table 1. Luke 18:9-14 - Points of Comparison*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Luke 18:9-14</th>
<th>Compared Verses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of humility</td>
<td>1 Peter 5:1-7, Psalms 25:9, Genesis 22:16-18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chosen verses highpoint the Biblical worldview of greatness and leadership primarily found in Luke 18:14, “… for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” For example, 1 Peter 5:1-7 describes the process of developing a humble (Christ-like) style of leadership. That kind of leadership requires: (a) oversight under God’s direction, (b) to be example to the flock, (c) to be subject to the elders, and (d) humility. The core message of 1 Peter 5:5: “… God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” reiterates humility as the golden key to a Christ-like leadership (Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17; Phil 2:3-11).

*Historical Intertexture*

The selected pericope speaks out of a real historical situation that must be recovered, and it represents that situation in a strategically shaped manner. This analysis is aimed at discerning the historical situation behind the text.
Historical intertexture deals with the analysis of a particular event or a particular period of time as past experiences (Oginde, 2011, p. 28). The historical criticism of Luke 18:9-14 requires that we challenge the text as presented, and dig deeper to clench the complete texture of the messages from the first-century reader and writer’s points of view to a modern time reader’s understanding.

The modern reader already knows that it is the Pharisee who will be condemned. However, today’s simple descriptive approach wrecks the parable (Marshall, 1977, p. 322). Knowing that Pharisees are regularly cast in the gospels as Jesus’ opposition, it can be easily judged that the Pharisee would be a self-righteous hypocrite and the Tax Collector would be humble, but the historical context is different.

Most modern Christians accept this without question, having already accepted all Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites. Yet this entirely misses the point. In Osborn’s (2006, pp. 242-243) view, the Pharisee’s prayer was perfectly acceptable to Jews of Jesus’ day. The hearer would have been quite satisfied with the prayer and shocked to see the despised Tax Collector justified. Jesus’ original purpose was “to unsettle his audience, to reverse their value system and force them to rethink their religious priorities” (p. 243).

The historical record of Jesus’ meekness goes beyond oral level and is not merely seen in his humble service to his disciples in washing their feet (John 13), but in his true love for them demonstrated in his sacrificial death for them on the cross (John 19:18-27, Matt 27:35-44, Mark 15:25-32, Luke 23:32-43). There are other historical cases of meekness in the Bible like Moses (Num 12:3) or Abraham (Gen 22:12, 16-18), but the climax can be found in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross (Phil 2:8).
(c) Social and Cultural Texture

Finding a better sociocultural understanding of the text becomes sensible when we recognize that the core concept of pericope is shaped around the decisive role of humility in leaders’ development. Social texture is a phenomenon that concerns a social manifestation in which the text points toward a particular social activity that occurred regularly amid people (Oginde, 2011, p. 28).

Social and cultural texture analysis is where the scholar invites in “the full resources of the social sciences into the environment of exegetical interpretation,” (Spranger, 2011, p. 84) but this is where the interpreter actually gets into trouble. The analysis of social and cultural textures address a key question: How does the text support social change? The analysis of social and cultural textures moves from the world of the text to the world of the author and audience (DeSilva, 2004, p. 24).

There are several points with the social context in which the parable occurred. For example, the social context of the parable is marked by the temple. The temple embodies the primary system by which Israel related with God (Friedrichsen, 2005). The style of praying in Jewish tradition was accompanied by a set of social norms and behaviors. For instance, looking to the sky was one of them. Jesus also looked upward before his prayer in John 11:41. This was probably a common posture in prayer among the Jews. According to the parable in Luke 18:13, the Tax Collector did not regard himself worthy to do this. He confessed his sinfulness freely. This in turn reflects a sign of regret that is the first step toward repentance in Christian ideology.

The fact that Pharisees brought conflict with Christianity seems clear throughout the Gospel. However, in Luke 14 and Luke 18, Pharisees are portrayed as self-righteous, judgmental, and law conscious. In Luke 7:36-47, a Pharisee objects to Jesus being anointed
by a sinful woman, and in Luke 11:37-54, the reaction of a Pharisee to Jesus’ lack of ceremonial washing before a meal prompted the pronouncement of a list of woes and the Pharisees’ active opposition.

All these religious contradictions are pointing to the fact that the Jewish society in Jesus’ time was suffering from a strict religious mindset that judged people according to their faces. The religion was practiced only on the surface and deep social problems like poverty, hypocrisy, adultery, tyranny, and so on all were neglected by religious leaders who enjoyed fulfilled lives. Matthew 12:1-8 describes a scene in which the disciples of Jesus plucked grain on the Sabbath; the Pharisees accused Jesus of failure in keeping the Law, and Jesus’ two-part response to his accusers. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they had forsaken the truths of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Rabbinowitz, 2004).

Cultural texture concerns symbolic words that particular communities of discourse nurture with special nuances and emphases (Oginde, 2011, p. 28). The cultural analysis of chosen pericope is exposed to considerable degree of sensitivity. Referring to Wink’s approach to the interpretation of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14, McKim (1986) reminds, “most of Jesus’ own hearers would at first identify themselves with the Pharisee as the bearer of religious and social status; but then suffer shock and consternation at the wholly unexpected justification of the publican. This of course raises a major hermeneutical problem. … The modern reader already knows that it is the Pharisee who will be condemned. Hence nowadays a simple descriptive approach wrecks the parable. It must come to speech anew, and not merely be repeated. For the ending of the parable has now in turn become embedded in the conventional judgments of religious man, from which the language-event is meant to free us!” (p. 98).
The Pharisees’ zeal to keep the Torah often placed them at odds with Jesus (DeSilva, 2004). That was rooted in a common social setting, but different cultural views. In the 18th chapter of Luke, a parallel can be identified between the Pharisee and the rich ruler and between the humility of the Tax Collector and the children.

According to Culpepper (1983, p. 340), the Pharisee and the rich ruler parallel each other because neither of them is humble before God. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other men—Robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like the Tax Collector. He brags to God that he fasts twice a week and always tithes a tenth of his money. Similar to the Pharisee, the rich man proclaims to Jesus that he has lived a sinless youth. He is not humble before God and he was not willing to give up all of his possessions like Jesus asks him to in verse. The Pharisee and the rich man are both focused entirely too much on their own life, making it more difficult for them to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Tax Collector and the children are similar because both of them are humble before God and in return are praised by God. The Tax Collector humbles himself before God saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” It is not told exactly why children are given access to heaven, but God proclaims that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.” It can be assumed that children are given access to the kingdom due to their innocence, powerlessness, and lack of credentialed virtue perceiving them to be humble just as the Tax Collector is (Culpepper, 1983, p. 345).

(d) Ideological Texture

According to Marshall (1977, p. 322), the Pharisees are those who insist on interpreting the word of grace, rather than letting themselves be interpreted by it. Marshall believes that most of Jesus’ own hearers would at first identify themselves with the Pharisee
as the hearer of religious and social status; but “then suffer shock and consternation at the wholly unexpected justification of the publican.”

Jesus targeted a social transformation by using the parable of Pharisee and the Tax Collector. According to Robbins (1996, p. 150), Jesus’ teachings (including the mentioned parable) can be interpreted utopian, which says “God calls us to replace the present social system with a new social organization from which evil is absent.”

According to Wilson (2011, p. 1) the Pharisees functioned in a bureaucratic manner. Their strict interpretation of the Torah often placed them in direct opposition with Jesus so, therefore, Jesus dealt with bureaucracy. In Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees who accused him of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus responded by stating that plucking grain on the Sabbath does not profane sacred writ. In doing so he reinterpreted the Torah and clarified the true nature of sacred endeavor.

The Pharisees, who were the “authorized teachers of the Torah,” were deeply committed to their understanding of truth (Rabbinowitz, 2004, p. 430). Their original intention was to make the Law relevant in all situations of daily life, but they became “obsessed with the minutiae of the Law” (Rabbinowitz, p. 442). Consequently, they viewed Jesus as profane. In Matthew 15:1-7 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for distorting God’s word for the sake of their traditions. He referred to them as “fools” (Matt 23:17) and “hypocrites” (Matt 23:23, 25, 27, 29) and “blind guides” (Matt 23:16) who lead people astray.

The Pharisees’ intention was to safeguard God’s blessing through the strict observance of their interpretation of the Torah; the end result, however, was that people were restricted from God’s presence (Driggers, 2007). On the other hand, Jesus was proclaiming the good news of becoming God’s children to all who believed in him (John 1:12). That could threaten Pharisees’ social position.
The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector paradigmatically exhibits an old ethical principle from Deuteronomy 8:2-3 about the necessity to humble oneself. Luke 18:14 suggest that one of the two characters has found an exit strategy through which he is "justified" - i.e., a pathway through which he finds grace. It’s clearly not the Pharisee, who (while perhaps very well intentioned) seems to have chosen a path of self-sufficiency, a path by which he believes that he can and will gain God’s grace if he can just work his economic system faithfully.

According to Keating (1999), anyone who exalts himself or herself “puts too much confidence in his or her own power. They do the opposite of those who have a low self-esteem. They have such a high self-esteem that they think they can practice any virtue or do anything. Therefore, they think people owe them something. When they make unjust demands on other people and manifest their own selfish programs for happiness, they are going to be humbled” (p. 42).

As Pierse (1998) reminds, “we live in a world where one has to present one’s curriculum vitae and where one tries to make it look as impressive as possible. One tries to be better than the rest of people. This is precisely what the Pharisee did, "he prayed to himself." God does not need to be impressed, but knows who we are already. What impresses God is not what we show ourselves to be, but the extent to which we know ourselves as we really are.” We need a change in cultural values of the contemporary world.

According to Kreider (1986), “this parable holds a trap that is at once obvious and precarious. The mention of the Pharisees, for most readers of the New Testament, sets the caveat. Whether rightly or wrongly, the caricature of the Pharisee often developed out of the New Testament is that of someone whose religious aspirations turned in upon oneself so that commitment to the tradition, however genuinely motivated, ended in hypocrisy. So, when the
Pharisee enters the scene, one is served notice that something must be looked at with scrutiny” (p. 458). The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector depicts Jesus’ desire for a paradigm shift in his contemporary social traditions shaped by old Jewish values—an ideological revolution.

Coming to modern time, a survey on servant leadership reveals eight major factors in developing a servant style of leadership, including humility. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) eight-dimensional measure is composed of: standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship.

Conclusion

The exegetical analysis of Luke 18:9-14 reveals two strategic points: (a) the golden key to the Kingdom of God is humility; (b) God’s politics is beyond human’s conventional calculations and surflcial judgments.

The ideological message that the author of the Gospel of Luke meant to communicate to his readers through this parable was the importance of having a humble relationship with God. The appeal for divine mercy is uttered in absolute humility, as in Psalms 51 and 130 (Kraeling, 1969, p. 234).

In the Jewish social context, the Pharisee did indeed show to have a relationship with God, but he did not trust God in this relationship. Culturally, the Pharisee trusted in his accomplishments and great works to provide relationship with God. The Pharisee was so focused on exalting himself that he missed out on having a true relationship with God as his creator.

On the other hand, the Tax Collector was not a righteous man, but he humbled himself before God and in return was exalted by God. God’s answer to those two both the
prayers reflects his politics in dealing with human’s insufficient nature and actions. In the
same way that God rejected Pharisee’s prayer and accepted the Tax Collector’s sincere plea
for forgiveness, he offers the gift of salvation and eternal life to those who are humble.

Brining that parable into the framework of leadership, the reader may found the
important role of humility in developing a real moral style of leadership. The historical record
of Jesus’ life in the New Testament is an expression of humility (Phil 2:5-11). Paul reminds
that humility is not just the key to a Christ-like style of leadership, but the way towards
salvation: “Continue working out your salvation with humility and dependence, for the one
bringing forth in you both the desire and the effort…is God” (Phil 2:12-13).

There are remarkable points on humility in the New Testament (2 Cor 10:1; 11:7; 1
Thess 2:6; Col 3:12; Eph 4:2). There are also other cases of humility in the Old Testament.
Moses is a case of humility, receiving correction and counsel from Jethro (Exod 18:13-27). In
a more serious case, Abraham reflects a high degree of humility before God when he agreed
to sacrifice his son Isaac for Him (Gen 22:1-19). But according to the Christian theology, no
one could sacrifice his life for the salvation of many except Jesus (Phil 2:3-11).

Understanding the true nature of humility before God may be out of our
understanding reach as Clements (1976) reminds, “a true humility towards him is essential
therefore, expressed in a reverent submission to his will which must be recognized as
reaching far beyond the range of man’s own knowledge” (p. 113). Ktimmel (p. 357)
considers Jesus’ leadership style as a reflection of “sovereignty in humility” crystalized in his
work of obedience, crowned by his death on the cross, and his resurrection. It should be
reminded that exploring the role of humility in developing a Christ-like style of leadership is
an open-ended discussion with many aspects to study.
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References


