# AT A GLANCE

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CORE VALUES

Community: The purpose of this curriculum is to build community within the body of believers around Jesus Christ.

Group Process: To build community, the curriculum must be designed to take a group through a step-by-step process of sharing your story with one another.

Interactive Bible Study: To share your “story,” the approach to Scripture in the curriculum needs to be open-ended and right brain—to “level the playing field” and encourage everyone to share.

Developmental Stages: To provide a healthy program in the life cycle of a group, the curriculum needs to offer courses on three levels of commitment: (1) Beginner Stage—low-level entry, high structure, to level the playing field; (2) Growth Stage—deeper Bible study, flexible structure, to encourage group accountability; (3) Discipleship Stage—in-depth Bible study, open structure, to move the group into high gear.

Target Audiences: To build community throughout the culture of the church, the curriculum needs to be flexible, adaptable and transferable into the structure of the average church.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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WELCOME TO THE
SERENDIPITY 301
DEPTH BIBLE STUDY SERIES

You are about to embark on an adventure into the powerful experience of depth Bible Study. The Serendipity 301 series combines three basic elements to produce a life-changing and group-changing course.

First, you will be challenged and enriched by the personal Bible Study that begins each unit. You will have the opportunity to dig into Scripture both for understanding and personal reflection. Although some groups may choose to do this section together at their meeting, doing it beforehand will greatly add to the experience of the course.

Second, you will benefit from the group sessions. Wonderful things happen when a small group of people get together and share their lives around the Word of God. Not only will you have a chance to take your personal study to a deeper level, you will have an opportunity to share on a deep level what’s happening in your life and receive the encouragement and prayer support of your group.

Third, the 301 courses provide the stimulus and tools for your group to take steps toward fulfilling your group mission. Whether or not your group has gone through the preparation of a Serendipity 101 and 201 course, you can profit from this mission emphasis. The 32-page center section of this book will guide you through this process. And questions in the closing section of the group agenda will prompt your group to act upon the mission challenge to “give birth” to a new small group.

Put these three components together, and you have a journey in Christian discipleship well worth the effort. Enjoy God’s Word! Enjoy genuine Christian community! Enjoy dreaming about your mission!
1. **What stage in the life cycle of a small group is this course designed for?**

   Turn to the first page of the center section of this book. There you will see that this 301 course is designed for the third stage of a small group. In the Serendipity “Game Plan” for the multiplication of small groups, your group is in the Release Stage.

2. **What are the goals of a 301 study course?**

   As shown on the second page of the center section (page M2), the focus in this third stage is heavy on Bible Study and Mission.

3. **What is the approach to Bible Study in this course?**

   This course involves two types of Bible Study. The “homework” assignment fosters growth in personal Bible Study skills and in personal spiritual growth. The group study gives everyone a chance to share their learning and together take it to a deeper level.

4. **What does the homework involve?**

   There are three parts to each assignment: (1) READ—to get the “bird’s-eye view” of the passage and record your first impressions; (2) SEARCH—to get the “worm’s-eye view” by digging into the passage verse-by-verse with specific questions; and (3) APPLY—to ask yourself, after studying the passage, “What am I going to do about it?”
5. **What if you don’t know very much about the Bible?**
   
   No problem. The homework assignment is designed to lead you step-by-step in your study. And there are study notes in each unit to give you help with key words, concepts and difficult passages.

6. **What is the agenda for the group meetings?**
   
   The completed homework assignment becomes the basis for the group sharing. (However, those who don’t do the homework should definitely be encouraged to come to the meeting anyway.) During the meeting the group will be guided to share on three levels: (1) TO BEGIN; (2) TO GO DEEPER; and (3) TO CLOSE.

7. **How can the group get through all the material?**
   
   Following the recommended time limits for each of the three sections will help keep you on track. Since you may not be able to answer all the questions with the time you have, you may need to skip some of them. Also, if you have more than seven people at a meeting, use the “Fearless Foursomes” described below for the Bible Study.

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### THE FEARLESS FOURSOME!

If you have more than seven people at a meeting, Serendipity recommends you divide into groups of 4 for the Bible Study. Count off around the group: “one, two, one, two, etc.”—and have the “ones” move quickly to another room for the Bible Study. Ask one person to be the leader and follow the directions for the Bible Study time. After 30 minutes, the Group Leader will call “Time” and ask all groups to come together for the Caring Time.

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8. **How does this course develop Group Building?**
   
   Although this series is Serendipity’s deepest Bible Study curriculum, Group Building is still essential. The group will continue “checking in” with each other and will challenge each other to grow in Christian discipleship. Working together on the group’s mission should also be a very positive group-building process.
9. **What is the mission of a 301 group?**

Page M3 of the center section summarizes the mission of groups using this course: to commission a team from your group to start a new group. The center section will lead your group in doing this.

10. **How do we incorporate this mission into the course?**

Page M5 of the center section gives an overview of the six steps in this process. You can either add this leadership training to the sessions a little bit at a time or in a couple of separate sessions.

11. **What is a group covenant?**

A group covenant is a “contract” that spells out your expectations and the ground rules for your group. It’s very important that your group discuss these issues—preferably as part of the first session (also see page M32 in the center section).

12. **What are the ground rules for the group?** *(Check those that you agree upon.)*

- [x] **PRIORITY:** While you are in the course, you give the group meetings priority.
- [x] **PARTICIPATION:** Everyone participates and no one dominates.
- [x] **RESPECT:** Everyone is given the right to their own opinion and all questions are encouraged and respected.
- [x] **CONFIDENTIALITY:** Anything that is said in the meeting is never repeated outside the meeting.
- [x] **EMPTY CHAIR:** The group stays open to new people at every meeting as long as they understand the ground rules.
- [x] **SUPPORT:** Permission is given to call upon each other in time of need—even in the middle of the night.
- [x] **ADVICE GIVING:** Unsolicited advice is not allowed.
- [x] **MISSION:** We agree to do everything in our power to start a new group as our mission (see center section).
INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

“He taught them many things by parables ...” (Mark 4:2).

Jesus was a master storyteller. Whether he was addressing a large crowd on a hillside, sharing a private meal with his disciples, or answering one of the Pharisees’ trick questions, Jesus would often use stories to make his point.

Jesus used other methods of teaching, of course. He gave lectures and sermons, he posed thought-provoking questions, and he debated and dialogued. But there was something unique about the stories he told. Though simple in form, these stories carried a deeper message that slowly penetrated the minds of his listeners until the truth of it exploded within them. Some people were enlightened and compelled to glorify God. Others were enraged when they realized what Jesus was really saying about them and about himself.

These stories—or parables—have a lasting quality about them. They not only challenged the original hearers to consider seriously their relationship with God, they also cause us to do the same. In this book, we will be studying 13 of Jesus’ best-known parables. But before we begin, we need to consider a few details about parables in general—their meaning, purpose and interpretation.

What Is a Parable?
The English word “parable” comes from the Greek word parable, which literally means “to place alongside.” So, a parable compares one thing to another. In the Gospels, they are specifically used to compare some aspect of common, everyday life with some reality about the kingdom of God. However, parables are not simply illustrations (such as those found in modern speech or sermons). An illustration may help an audience understand or apply a point the speaker is making, but it is not in itself essential to what the speaker is trying to say; the main weight of the communication is carried by concepts and ideas. In contrast, a parable is the message. It is not used to illustrate the point; it is the point. In graphic, picturesque language the parable communicates insight about God, his kingdom, and the response expected of those who hear.

There is no single, uniform type of parable. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the word parable is applied to proverbs (1 Sam. 10:12; Prov. 1:1,6), riddles (Judges 14:10–18), taunt songs (Micah 2:4; Hab. 2:6ff) and allegories (Isa. 5:1–7; Ezek. 17:3–24). The same broad use of the word is found in the New Testament, where parables range from short one-liners (e.g., “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick”—Mark 2:17) to extended narratives like the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

Parables are not unique to Jesus. Parables such as those Jesus told can be found in the Old Testament, and in the literature of Jewish rabbis (prior to Jesus) who used parables as a means of teaching. While the breadth of the nature and purpose of parables makes definition difficult, there are two helpful definitions:

• A metaphor or simile drawn from life or nature which captures our interest (by being so vivid and strange) and leaves us just enough confused (and teased) to think deeply about what it exactly means for our lives.
• A dramatic form of theological language that compels us to make a response, because it reveals the nature of the kingdom of God (or shows how a child of the kingdom should act).

The Purpose of the Parables
Both definitions emphasize how the parables of Jesus call for response. Parables are not simply stories (like Aesop’s fables) that reinforce the kind of moral values that contribute to a good life. Nor are they Zen riddles meant to unhinge our minds to prepare us to transcend levels of consciousness. Instead, as the second definition shows, their intent is to reveal something of the kingdom of God and to call the hearer to respond to Jesus and his mission. They describe what life in that kingdom is like. They portray something of the nature of the King. They call the listeners to decide how they will live in light of the presence of the King in their midst. As has been often observed, no one would have bothered to crucify an itinerant Jewish peasant who went around telling stories that encouraged proper moral behavior! No—the parables are stories of a new kingdom that stands against the old ways.
While it is popularly thought that Jesus used parables to simplify hard truths, the reality is that the parables themselves were difficult to understand! As noted in the first definition, one mark of many of Jesus’ parables is that they have a twist that would have been totally unexpected to his hearers, and disturbed their assumptions about the way things are. A Samaritan, despised by the orthodox Jews as unworthy of God, ends up as the hero in a story that includes Jewish priests and Levites. Despotism, fabulously wealthy kings, normally concerned only with their own power and wealth, mercifully cancel enormous debts owed to them by mere servants who have wasted the king’s resources. People throw a party over the recovery of one stupid lamb that got lost from a herd. As Jesus speaks to the Middle Eastern listener of his day, he knows that none of these actions are normal. It is precisely these strange twists that make the parables like thought-bombs which are tossed into the lives of those who hear them. Some parables may have a short fuse and others may have a long one, but sooner or later the parable explodes, rocking the hearer with new awareness about the implications of Jesus and his kingdom. In these parables “the ordinary has gone askew and thereby shocks us into realizing that the parables lead into another way of thinking about life.”

Craig Blomberg provides a helpful summary of the overall purposes of the parables:

1. Jesus has three main topics of interest: the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship, and the dangers of disobedience.

2. The central theme uniting all of the lessons of the parables is the kingdom of God. It is both present and future ... It involves both personal transformation and social reform. It is ... the dynamic power of God’s personal revelation of himself in creating a human community of those who serve Jesus in every area of their lives.

3. The teachings of the parables raise the question of Jesus’ identity. Who is this one who, by his teaching, can claim to forgive sins, pronounce God’s blessing on social outcasts, and declare that final judgment will be based on the responses people make to him?

4. Jesus’ parables include implicit claims to deity. Jesus associates himself with authority figures in his parables (which obviously stand for the God of the Hebrew Scriptures). His audiences must decide whether to accept these claims and worship him, or to reject them as misguided or even blasphemous. But Jesus’ parables leave no neutral ground for casual interest or idle curiosity. They sharply divided their original audiences into disciples and opponents. They must continue to function in the same way today.

Interpreting the Parables
For much of the history of the church, the parables were seen as elaborate allegories. In an allegory, the details of a story have a deeper meaning that the reader must discern. While a few of the parables in the Gospels are interpreted allegorically by Jesus himself (i.e., Matt. 13:24–30,36–43), this approach to the parables led some interpreters to assign meanings to details that had no relation to anything that Jesus’ original hearers would have understood. The danger in treating parables as allegories is that the parables can then be manipulated to support whatever theological interests are important to the reader, rather than allowing them to convey the original intention of Jesus.

The allegorical approach was finally challenged by leaders of the Reformation period. Calvin, Luther and others sought to understand parables within the context of Jesus’ ministry. But even they often failed to understand much of what Jesus was saying. It wasn’t until the 19th century that scholars began to study these teachings in light of the historical, cultural and theological realities of Jesus’ time. Since then, in reaction to the excessive, fanciful allegorizing of the parables that dominated earlier periods of the church, the prevailing position has been that parables have only one main point, and that this point is somehow related to the kingdom of God.

While this was a needed corrective, today there are scholars who argue that this perspective is too limited. These scholars have opened the way to looking for multiple meanings in the parables, not in the sense that they become imaginative allegories, but in the sense that the
various characters and situations in the parables are meant to embrace various theological themes that work together to evoke a response from the hearer.

Kenneth Bailey suggests several important principles to keep in mind in seeking to understand, interpret and apply a parable:

1. **Determine the audience.** Is Jesus talking to the scribes and Pharisees, to the crowds, or to his disciples? The meaning of the parable is related to the audience who heard it. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) takes on new meaning when it is realized that Jesus told it to a group of Pharisees who were appalled by his association with people they considered to be sinners. Knowing this, the fact that we are not told how the older brother in the story finally responds takes on a new significance. What on one level is the story of God’s grace to sinners is, on another level, an open-ended challenge for these Pharisees (who are like the older brother) to repent.

2. **Examine carefully the setting / interpretation provided by the author or his source.** Most of the parables are found in the context of a particular setting which informs the meaning of the parable. For example, the parable about the generous moneylender (Luke 7:41–42) takes on special meaning when we see that it is found in the context of Jesus’ encounter with a sinful woman and a self-righteous Pharisee. The context makes it clear that this simple story is a strong rebuke of the lack of love for God on the part of the Pharisee. It also forces the reader to ask questions regarding the authority and identity of Jesus, since he clearly places himself in the role of the one who forgives enormous debts owed to him.

3. **Try to discern the cultural presuppositions of the story, keeping in mind that the people in them are Palestinian peasants.** The point here is not only to identify Middle Eastern customs (such as what people wore or how they traveled), but also to become familiar with their values, their ways of relating to one another, and their sense of propriety. While we in our culture do not see anything particularly strange with older men running (they are either exercising or are about to miss their plane!), older men in the Middle East always walked slowly as a sign of their dignity. This sheds new light on the detail in the Parable of the Prodigal Son which tells how the father ran to greet his son.

4. **Try to discern what symbols the original audience would have instinctively identified in the parable.** This process requires us to get into someone else’s world. To speak of Santa Claus in the United States is to evoke a whole range of images and feelings that are culturally associated with Santa Claus. However, a man from China would not react the same way to such a comment, since Santa plays no part in Chinese culture. We do not immediately grasp the meanings of the symbols in the same way as the original listeners would have, because we do not share their culture. We have to work at it.

5. **Determine what response the original audience is pressed to make in the original telling of the parable.** As we see the effect the parable was intended to have upon its audience, we can consider what parallel effects it is to have upon us. St. Augustine’s interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan laid stress on the importance of getting people into the church in order to be saved. However, since the scribe who asked the question that prompted the parable (Luke 10:25–29) would have understood Jesus’ story as a call for him to start acting as a neighbor to anyone in need, it is clear that Augustine’s application is invalid. As important as the church is, involvement in it simply is not the topic of this parable.

6. **Discern what the parable says about the cluster of theological themes that it affirms and/or presupposes.** The parables reflect truths about God and how God expects his followers to live. Once we have identified the major symbols the original listeners would have understood and have discerned the response that the parable calls forth on the part of its listeners, we can discern the central truths about God and discipleship which are encapsulated within the parable. For example, Bailey suggests that the parable about the obedient servant in Luke
17:7–10 is built upon the assumptions that the believer is expected to obey God as his servant, that salvation is a gift not a reward, that believers have no claim upon God, and that God is served as one obeys Jesus.

Some of these suggestions may make us feel that there is no way we can understand the parables. After all, most of us have no idea what cultural assumptions or values a Middle Eastern peasant at the time of Jesus might have had! Fortunately, this gap can be filled in through three main ways.

First, we can engage in thoughtful, careful reading of the text to see what it says and what it stresses. Discovering the context of a parable and the responses it generated among people is not difficult, since most of the parables occur in the middle of a bigger story. We can read around the parable to see how it fits into the bigger picture of what is happening. The more we read the Bible, the more familiar we will become with the way people thought and felt at the time. This will help us keep the parables in their historical context and protect us from reading our own thoughts and ideas into them. (The questions for personal study in this book will help you ask the right kinds of questions for this type of careful reading.)

Secondly, we can avail ourselves of the many excellent tools available to help us understand the background of the Bible and its ancient Middle Eastern culture. Bible dictionaries, commentaries, studies of the culture of biblical times (such as the Life and Times of Jesus by Alfred Eidersheim), and books on the parables are invaluable aids in this process. The notes that accompany each study are drawn from such resources and the bibliography in this book provides a good reading list for more comprehensive study.

Thirdly, we can benefit from learning about Middle Eastern people and cultures of today. Kenneth Bailey points out that many of the peasant customs and attitudes in the Middle East today have remained relatively unchanged for centuries. The insights about relationships and values that we can learn from Middle Eastern people today can shed valuable light on the meaning of the parables.6

Conclusion
The parables remain a rich source of spiritual insight for us. While most North Americans are more used to hearing their theology expressed in creeds and concepts (such as “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...” or “The chief purpose of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever”), the parables present us with pictures of God and his kingdom. Like any good art, the parables communicate beyond their original audience. While rooted in the life and times of Jesus, the realities about God and discipleship that the parables present transcend that culture, and speak to us as well in images that are more powerful than words. We may well forget the formal definition of God (found in the catechisms that we were forced to memorize in church school), but we are not likely to forget the parable which tells us that God is like a shepherd who goes to great lengths to find his lost sheep. Those long sermons about what it really means to be a Christian may fade from our memory, but we will remember that the people of the kingdom are like the man who found a treasure buried in a field and in his joy sold all that he had in order to buy the field and gain the treasure. Theological discussions about the end times may leave us suspecting that everyone is really using Bible texts to suit their own perspectives, but we can find a clear word of hope in the assurance that the kingdom of God is like a little bit of yeast in a batch of dough which ends up influencing every part of that dough.

The parables are word pictures Jesus painted in order to teach us theology in a way that would stick with us. Once the parable is heard, it is etched in the mind, where the Spirit of God can, over time, reveal its deeper implications to us as we are prepared to hear them. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9).

2Adapted from C.H. Dodd, quoted in The Gospel in Parable (ibid., p. 5).
3Adapted from Bailey, Poet and Peasant: Through Peasant Eyes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
4Donahue, op cit.
5Craig Blomberg, Interpreting the Parables (InterVarsity Press), pp. 326–327.
6Adapted from Bailey, Poet and Peasant: Through Peasant Eyes, pp. xxii–xxiii.
UNIT 1—The Pharisee & Tax Collector / Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ 14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

READ

Two readings of the passage are suggested—each with a response to be checked or filled in on the worksheet.

First Reading / First Impressions: To get familiar with the passage as though you are reading this passage for the first time and to record your “first impressions” on the worksheet. What is your immediate reaction to:

- The Pharisee:
- The Tax Collector:

Second Reading / Big Idea: To get the overall idea, thought or “gist” of the passage, as though you are seeing the action from the press box—high above the stadium. What strikes you as the message of this parable?

- ☐ Good works can’t earn salvation. ☐ God knows what’s in our hearts.

SEARCH

1. Jesus makes a stark contrast in this parable between two kinds of people. Who was the culturally respectable person, and why was the other person so disrespected (see notes on vv. 9–10)?
2. What attitudes, beliefs or values made the Pharisee feel so superior?


3. How did the tax collector feel about his standing before God?


4. Why is the tax collector the one who goes away justified, or in right standing, before God (see note on v. 14)?


5. How can a person humble himself / herself before God?


**APPLY**

1. As you begin this course, what are some goals you would like to work on? Check one or two from the list below and add another if you wish.
   - to get to know God in a more personal way
   - to understand what I believe as a Christian and where I stand on issues
   - to develop my skills in Bible study and personal devotions
   - to belong to a small group that will support me in my growth
   - to think through my values and priorities in light of God’s will
   - to wrestle with the next step in my spiritual journey

2. What are you willing to commit to in the way of disciplines during the time you are in this course?
   - to complete the Bible Study home assignment before the group meets
   - to attend the group meetings except in cases of emergency
   - to share in leading the group—taking my turn in rotation
   - to keep confidential anything that is shared in the group
   - to reach out to others who are not in a group and invite them to join us
   - to participate in the group’s mission of “giving birth” to a new group (see center section)
GROUP AGENDA

Every group meeting has three parts: (1) To Begin (10–15 minutes) to break the ice; (2) To Go Deeper (30 minutes) for Bible Study; and (3) To Close (15–30 minutes) for caring and prayer. When you get to the second part, have someone read the Scripture out loud and then divide into groups of 4 (4 at the dining table, 4 at the kitchen table, etc.). Then have everyone come back together for the third part.

TO BEGIN / 10–15 Min. (Choose 1 or 2)
1. What motivated you to join this group?
2. In high school, what did it take to be part of the “in crowd”? How close did you get?
3. Where is your favorite place to pray?

TO GO DEEPER / 30 Min. (Choose 2 or 3)
1. How do each of the men in this parable see themselves? How sincere do you think each of them were?
2. What question from the homework assignment stands out to you?
3. If you are really honest, in what religious practices or accomplishments do you take pride?
4. When was the first time you cried out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”? When was the last time?
5. Right now, considering your attitudes toward others and your reason for being accepted by God, are you more like the Pharisee or the tax collector?
6. CASE STUDY: Dan is a pastor. He also has a problem with pornography, which he keeps secret. To overcome his addiction, he works harder and harder and preaches tougher and tougher about keeping your mind “pure.” What should Dan do?

TO CLOSE / 15–30 Min.
1. What did you check under APPLY for the goals you would like to work on during this course? What disciplines are you willing to commit to (second question in APPLY)?
2. With whom can you be really open and share your problems? How do you feel about opening up with this group?
3. How would you like the group to pray for you?

NOTES

Summary. This parable relates to the parable that precedes it in Luke 18:1–8 in that it pertains to prayer, but it really belongs more with the two scenes that follow it: Jesus with the little children in verses 15–17 and Jesus and the rich young ruler in verses 18–30. Both the parable and the subsequent scenes revolve around the fact that God’s kingdom is given to a far different group of people (little children and the poor) than the ones traditionally thought to have earned it. The parable (vv. 9–14) deals with the attitude of repentant humility required for being right with God, while the two scenes (vv. 15–17; 18–30) emphasize the openness of faith and the absolute commitment to Jesus that is necessary.

18:9 confident of their own righteousness. This typifies the attitude of a person who assumes—wrongly—that his or her performance in life satisfies God’s standards (Phil. 3:3–9; Gal. 3:10–14).

looked down on everybody else. Literally, this is “to treat with contempt.” The Pharisees considered themselves superior to other Jews who were unable (or unwilling) to conform to their detailed interpretation of the Law of Moses.

18:10 went up to the temple to pray. Twice daily, the priests at the temple offered a lamb as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. At these services, people would gather to join in the liturgy and pray.

Pharisee. The Pharisees were a small, powerful religious sect whose prime concern was keeping the Law in all its detail. While modern readers of the NT assume the Pharisees are the “bad guys” in the story, the original audience of this parable respected them as especially devout, godly people.

tax collector. Jesus’ listeners would have considered a tax collector as vile as a robber or murderer. Tax collectors were thought to be traitors, because they collaborated with the Roman power in order to become wealthy. Since only the tax collector knew the tax rate required by Rome, he was free to charge whatever the market would bear. Once he paid what he owed Rome, the rest was his to keep.

18:11 stood up. This was the typical posture for prayer. The contrast with the position of the tax collector (v. 13) indicates the Pharisee may have stood as closely as possible to the Most Holy Place in the temple, because he assumed the right to draw near to the presence of God.
To us it is unimaginable that such a prayer might be said in public, yet it would not be unusual for holy men of the time to pray publicly like this. One well-known rabbinic prayer that dates to a time not too long after the time of Jesus reads: “Praised be the Lord that He did not make me a heathen, for all heathen are as nothing before him; praised be He that He did not make me a woman, for woman is not under obligation to fulfill the law; praised be He that He did not make me ... an uneducated man, for the uneducated man is not cautious to avoid sins” (Stott). The Pharisee may have felt it his duty to offer such a prayer aloud as a way of instructing “sinners” in the crowd about the way of righteousness.

In the Talmud, one rabbi was reported to have been so confident of his own righteousness that were only a hundred saved from judgment, he and his son would be among that number; if only two, then he felt that it would be he and his son!

While the NIV separates the listing of robbers, evildoers and adulterers from the tax collector, the grammar of the verse also allows the entire list to be meant as a reference to the tax collector. They were considered robbers and cheats. Adultery might have been added to highlight the tax collector’s sinfulness, or may have been meant figuratively to describe someone who has forsaken loyalty to God. The Pharisee’s prayer may well be an attack on the very fact that such a man would dare be present in the temple.

While Jews were only required to fast on the Day of Atonement, Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday in an attempt to gain merit with God. Although all Jews were expected to give a tithe of one’s produce, Pharisees carefully tithed even things that were not required (see Luke 11:42). This man’s external performance of religious obligations was exemplary.

The tax collector likewise stands apart from the crowd, because he is too ashamed to join them.

Bailey points out that this is an uncommon action for a Middle Eastern man, done only on occasions of great anguish.

Literally, this is “make an atonement.” In light of the ceremony under way at the temple, the tax collector pleads that the atoning sacrifice might apply to him. He realizes this is his only hope before God.

Here is where the listeners would have been surprised. How could it be that the Pharisee, the model of righteousness, is not right before God, whereas the tax collector is forgiven, acquitted by God? The surprising twist in the parable is that righteousness is a matter of humble self-recognition of sin and dependence upon the atonement God provides as a gift (rather than a matter of impressing God with one’s performance).

This was a common wisdom saying that echoes a central theme in Jewish teaching about the spiritual life (see 1 Sam. 2:8; Ps. 18:27; Prov. 3:34; Isa. 57:15; Matt. 23:12; Luke 1:52; 14:11). The parable simply reminds the listeners of a truth they should have realized long ago.