

Anyone know what this is? You won't see anything quite like it these days: it's my "A" Level certificate, from back in the old days when it was so much harder to get an A Grade, or so they say.

But this is a real "A" Level certificate: it would have been a lot less work and a lot less trouble to print my own award certificate. That wouldn't be a very good way of doing things, and I don't think anyone would be too impressed with awards like that.

But there are a lot of people who do seem to be giving themselves awards for things.

Some are material awards, but others are a sort of imaginary award, but just as important to the person giving them to himself.

The Pharisee that Jesus is describing has given himself a certificate with five awards on it:

Not being a robber or extortioner

Not being unjust or an evil doer

Not being an adulterer

Fasting regularly

God: I thank you that I am not like all other men. This is an extraordinary claim for him to make. But it's quite in keeping with the view that the Pharisees had at the time.

Rabbi Simeon, one of the Pharisees, said, that if there were only thirty religious men in the world like Abraham, he and his son would be two of them; if only two, he and his son would be those; and if only one, that would be himself.

And these people will spend his time looking down on all those who haven't got awards for these things.

The problem is that there are still people like this around today, looking down on others, maybe without meaning to do so, as they say that they are doing well because of how much they give to the church, or how much time they spend working for the church, or praying, or how little time they spend robbing or murdering or committing adultery.

Now, don't get me wrong: it **does** matter if you are doing good or bad things, but it **isn't** a way for you to set out and judge other people for what they do or don't do. And it doesn't give you any bargaining power with God, or with the church or with anyone else...

I give regularly, so I ought to be on the church council.

Dear Lord, I help with Pathies, so I deserve to have my prayers answered.

I come to the Sunday evening service every week, so I should be allowed to lead the music every once in a while.

I don't lie or cheat or steal, Lord, so I deserve to be saved. You owe it to me.

Now, are these things even the slightest bit what we are thinking? Maybe, but that's not the way it works. We think we want God to be fair, but we don't.

A lady went to see a famous artist and she questioned him very carefully about painting her portrait. She said, "I just hope you can do me justice." And he looked her over very carefully and said "You don't want justice, you want mercy!"

That's where we all should be: James chapter 2 says "For God will not show mercy when he judges the person who has not been merciful; but mercy triumphs over judgment."

Listen to the other man praying: he isn't looking up at all but saying "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The others want to claim their rights. Earlier in Luke's gospel we heard "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." This is not a promise – it is a command – and also a warning. Yet these people who are quick to point the finger at others never like to point the figure to themselves, or can explain or rationalise it. "Oh, but that's different!"

They demand their rights and privileges, and that's part of the problem, not just in the things of God, but in everything: with rights come responsibilities.

Fortunately, God does give us certain rights and we can find the official word in the Bible:

The right to turn the other cheek

The right to bear all things

The right to be long-suffering

The right to show Christian Virtue and Christian Character

Of course, these may not be the rights you were hoping for as a Christian.

The person who has printed his own awards will say "I prayed and God showed me I deserve better than this."

The apostle Paul prayed and God showed him, "Love bears all things." Look at 1 Corinthians 13.

And all the time we see the tax collector standing and not looking up and saying "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

They expected God to do something for them because of what they had done.

Many Christians expect God to heal them or answer their prayers based on what they have done for God.

Yet the Pharisee didn't receive anything from God. Jesus said of the second man "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.”

We're not going to get salvation, healing, blessing or an answer to our prayers based on their own works.

Isaiah writes in chapter 64: “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” but perhaps I can choose a more positive verse to say the same. How about St Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9 – “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves. It is a gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast.”

Or Titus in 3:5 – “He saved us not through the righteous things we had done but because of his mercy.”

The Pharisees were very precise, and made sure that they gave a tenth of everything – even the herbs they grew – but they forgot that God's judgement was coming. One day, God will judge them and us.

And they forgot mercy. Because they had forgotten judgement, they had no fear of omitting love and mercy. Yet we know that God's love and God's mercy are absolutely vital to our salvation. Why?

They forgot faith: they were the very finest men of God and they wanted to climb the ladder of religious works right to the very top. But the Bible doesn't give us a religious system of dead works.

Instead, it offers a living relationship with the Living God through his son Jesus Christ.

Have you been depending on your imaginary certificates telling all about your religious accomplishments? Have you been trusting in these to guarantee that you will get the answers you want to your prayers, or for healing, or even salvation. It's time to leave them at the foot of the

cross of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Come to God trusting not in your own works but in the finished work of Christ on the cross, who died once for all of our sins, and offers us mercy and forgiveness from all our sins.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”