



*Written by  
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## “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”

**Scripture:** Luke 18: 9-14

**Dramatic Category:** Reader’s Theater

### What is “Reader’s Theater”?

Reader's Theater is dramatic literature presented by readers who are seated and who read the script using the techniques of oral interpretation, characterization, and pantomime to create a theatrical effect. The scriptural passages presented in this fashion will breathe new life into what we “think we have heard.”

### NOTE:

See the "Ten Commandments for Reader's Theater" after the script. There, you will find helpful hints to maximize this creative art form to communicate the truth of God’s Word.

This Reader's Theater selection also contains the elements of a skit, in that you may opt to have interaction between Chris, Jim and Karen. In this case you mix the dramatic genres to create a "Reader's Theater Skit." The Narrator stands off to the side and reads the story while a re-enactment of the biblical narrative takes place at center stage.

**Topic:** The dangers of self-righteousness

**Performance Time:** 4 minutes

**Number of Players:** 3 players (*2 males, 1 female*) + a narrator (*male or female*)

**Objective:** To show that humility has integrity and pride is self-worship.

### Synopsis:

This "Reader's Theater" is a re-telling of the "Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector," placed in a modern context, while the original text is read by a narrator. In this parable, pious Chris enters the church to pray and thumbs his nose at the ragged couple who enter and sit across from him. They carry a container labeled, "Please Give." Chris is outraged and thanks God that he is not a looser like those people. As the couple exits, the husband knocks over the container and the other side of it becomes visible; it reads "A new kidney for Jeremy." He asks for Chris' prayers because today his wife is having surgery to donate a kidney to their son, Jeremy. Chris is dumbfounded and humbled, just like the Pharisee in the parable Jesus told.

**Cast:**

Narrator: *Stands at stage right and reads the parable between the action and lines of the other players who are seated at center stage.*  
Chris: *A pious Christian who represents the Pharisee*  
Karen: *A ragged Christian who humbles herself before God*  
Jim: *Karen's husband, also a ragged Christian*

**Costumes:**

Jim and Karen dress very simply, a bit ragged  
Chris wears a 3-piece suit, carries a brief case and a cell phone.

**Props:**

A container labeled "PLEASE GIVE" on one side and "A NEW KIDNEY FOR JEREMY" on the other side.  
A small black notebook for the narrator's script  
A cell phone for Chris  
3 music stands (for readers)  
3 chairs (for readers)

**Lights:** Two light pools:

Pool 1: at stage right for the narrator  
Pool 2: at center stage

**Sound:**

A standing mic for the narrator  
3 standing mics for the readers (3 wireless mics for them would be ideal)

**Staging Note:**

Arrange the center stage like the front seats of a pew at church. Readers are seated with their scripts on music stands in front of them, facing the audience.

Be sure the music stands are not too high, or you will block the audience's view of the actors' pantomime and facial expressions.

The narrator holds the script in a small black notebook, and uses the free hand for gestures.

**Narrator**

**Karen**

**Jim**

**Chris**

## The Script:

### NOTE:

You have the option of memorizing the lines, and acting out this skit as a narrated skit; if so, remove the music stands and scripts.

*(Characters are seated with their heads bowed when the scene opens.)*

### LIGHTS: LIGHTS UP ON NARRATOR AT STAGE RIGHT

**Narrator:** To those, who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.

### LIGHTS: LIGHTS UP ON CENTER STAGE CHURCH SCENE

**Narrator:** Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee ...

*(Chris lifts his head proudly, talks in mime on his cell phone. He ends the call, strikes a very pious pose, and prepares to pray.)*

and the other a tax collector.

*(A poor couple, dressed like homeless people lift their heads. They sit opposite Chris, who glares at them via a focal point out over the audience's head Jim sets a container on the floor that reads "PLEASE GIVE." Place it so the audience can read it. They also prepare to pray.)*

**Narrator:** The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself  
“God, I thank you that I am not like other men--

**Chris:** *(in a loud stage whisper as though he were praying)*  
Oh God, Thank you that I went to college, and I didn't turn out like those people.

**Narrator:** robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.

**Chris:** Scourge on society. Lazy good-for nothings!

**Narrator:** I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

**Chris:** *(audience aside)*  
At least I make a contribution to the world.  
I give back; you just drain the system. Get a job

**Narrator:** “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.’

**Karen:** *(Jim and Karen lean into each other as she prays.)*  
Oh God, I am at the end of myself. I'm scared. I need you to be my strength.

**Narrator:** I tell you that this person, rather than the other, went home justified before God.  
For everyone who exalts himself *(Chris glares at the couple again)*

will be humbled, and he who humbles himself  
*(Jim and Karen nod and smile at Chris.)*

will be exalted.

**LIGHTS: LIGHTS OUT ON THE NARRATOR AT STAGE RIGHT**

**Jim:** *(To Karen)* Are you sure you want to go through with this?

**Karen:** Yes, I guess that's why God gave us two kidneys;  
just in case your child needs one.

**Jim:** Come on, God is with us.

*(Jim shifts position in the chair and knocks over the "PLEASE GIVE" container. Chris picks it up and reads the other side labeled, "A NEW KIDNEY FOR JEREMY." Be sure the audience reads that side.)*

**Jim:** I'm sorry. I'm a little clumsy... I'm kinda' pre-occupied. My wife's having surgery today, and it cost more than we could ever pay.

*(Chris sits dumbfounded holding the container with the label, "A NEW KIDNEY FOR JEREMY" facing the audience.)*

**Jim:** Keep us in your prayers, would you?

*(Jim and Karen slowly bow their heads, indicating that they are leaving, as Chris watches them, expressionless and humbled.)*

**LIGHTS: LIGHTS FADE OUT CENTER STAGE**

**The End**

# The Ten Commandments of Reader's Theater

1. **Formation** is a key visual. Arrange the characters in such a way that relationships between them are clear. Place the main character(s) either downstage, alone, or at a higher level. Make it clear who is driving the scene.
2. **Characterization** is achieved by dressing the readers up in full character costume, including character props (providing they do not pass the props around.) Also use any accents, and peculiar behaviors connected to the character: i.e., nervous, angry, etc.
3. **Pantomime** is the theatrical skill used to create the environment. Readers use pantomime to react to the events in the script or to the environment suggested by the story: i.e., a hot day, setting the table, writing a letter, etc.
4. **Focal points** determine the location of the scene or the person who is speaking. The eyes of the readers shift to different points, just like eyes shift in real life.
  - a. **By location:** All readers who are in a particular scene will focus at one common spot just over the heads of the audience. When all their eyes go there, it means they have all “met” at one location: i.e., the kitchen, or the barn, etc.
  - b. **By speaker:** When the entire scene happens in one location, such as in a courtroom, the focal points change based on who is speaking. Each character has his/her own focal point, and when that character speaks both the character and the others in the scene focus on that point.
5. **Props** are handed off from character to character using a technique called the “**mime pass.**” No actual prop is used. Character “A” extends his/her hand in the direction of the focal point, while Character “B” hands an imaginary object off in mid-air in direction of the same focal point, toward Character “A’s” outstretched hand. Character “A” then appears to receive the object, and Character “B” appears to let it go. NOTE: Whichever character can be seen by the other leads the action. Use “key words” in the dialogue to signal when one “A” grabs the item and “B” lets it go; this is easier for players than merely watching. **No lateral movement or contact is made between the characters. They never look at or touch each other. They meet only with their eyes at focal points.**
6. **Selection of dramatic literature:** Scenes in which 3 or more people engage in some important, witty, interesting exchange of items and ideas make interesting Reader's Theater selections. Usually the turning point of a play, a moment of crisis or comedy, or a key scene is best. Children's stories, parables, Bible stories, fables, folk tales are wonderful.

7. **Narration** is critical when the characters change locations or engage in some activity in the course of the story that cannot be portrayed in mime, such as “They began to build the house,” or “Fern ran across the grassy field.” In that case, the narrator reads the transitional text that moves the story along. Drop all the “He said,” “She said while drying her tears,” etc. out of the text. We can “see” as the character portrays the dialogue.
8. **Line memorization** is not word-for-word essential, since the script is in front of the readers on music stands, leaving hands free for pantomime; however, the lines should be almost memorized so the eyes can lift off the page for focal points. The script is a crutch.
9. **On and Off Stage** is shown by the character bowing his/her head down which means, “I am not in this scene,” and lifting the head up and moving to the focal point to signify participation in the scene.
10. **Practice, practice, practice!** Reader’s theater is an extremely difficult art form. When done correctly, it is one of the most effective tools of communication in theater; when done poorly, it does the dramatic literature a horrible disservice. To coordinate the “mime pass,” the focal points, and to achieve accurate characterization through oral interpretation require tremendous amounts of practice.