

I'm SO Glad I'm Not Like THAT Person

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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October 27, 2019

Can you believe that Pharisee? Wow. What a hypocrite. What an egotistical, arrogant, self-righteous, judgmental person. God, I thank you that I am not like... Oh... wait... darn it.

In all honesty, have we not all, to some degree or another, thought or even prayed similar sentiments as the Pharisee, "God, I thank you that I am not like those other people." For the Pharisee, 'other people' included a tax collector, someone who most likely did not live up his litmus test of being a good and faithful follower of religious standards. I'll let you fill in the blanks for who those 'other people' are for you. It could be those of differing political persuasions, or theological perspectives, or economic status, or level of education, or whatever.

Over the centuries we have been conditioned to see the Pharisee as the bad guy in this parable and the tax collector as the good guy. Therefore, we tend to cast ourselves in the role of the tax collector, as those people who recognize our sinful ways and ask for God's mercy and forgiveness – as we rightfully do in our weekly unison Prayer of Confession. However, in the Jewish culture in which this parable was first heard, the Pharisees were seen as exemplars of righteousness, from which all others measured their traditional religious practices. Since Pharisees followed through on all the proper religious duties, the original hearers of Jesus' parable would have cast them into the role as the ones who were faithful and trusting of God. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were considered by their fellow Jews to be traitors since they basically worked for the oppressive government of the Roman Empire. And since it was common for tax collectors to overcharge what was required, in order to skim money off the top, they would have been seen as the ones who *should be* despised, and for which others were justified in having contempt.

Given this understanding, if we were to set this parable in today's context we wouldn't like what we hear. The Pharisee could be cast as an example of the ideal church member, one who participates in all the church functions, is seen as a deeply spiritual person, and is a good financial pledger, even if not a full 10% tithe (remember, this is Stewardship Sunday). That's why Jesus Seminar scholar, John Dominic Crossan, says, rather crassly, this parable could be written in this day and age, "A pope and a pimp walk into St. Peter's Cathedral to pray..." Puts a new light on things, doesn't it? It is with this proper realignment, then, that we should approach this parable.

Perhaps worse than bragging about his own virtue righteousness, we learn that **the Pharisee has contempt for others not like himself. What we have here is a religious expression of spirituality that judges, despises, disrespects, and demeans other human beings. Love of God has been ripped away from love of neighbor. That's also the underlying problem with stereotypes.** As we learn elsewhere in the scriptures, if we do not love the neighbor who we see, we cannot really love God, who we cannot see.

Therefore, every time we have contempt for, look down on, or despise others, we are just as guilty as the Pharisee in this parable. Unfortunately, we see this played out all the time. We have become so deeply divided along any number of ideological, political, social and religious issues that contempt for others who don't believe or behave the same way has become one of the most common characteristics of our culture and society today. We no longer just have differences of opinions, we often *despise* those on the 'other side'. Now, that doesn't mean there isn't an important place for critique and sharing our understanding of truth. That's speaking out with a prophetic voice, especially when speaking truth to power. Yet, perhaps we all have something to learn from the attitude of the tax collector.

Unlike the Pharisee's prayer, which reveals his self-absorption in his own virtue and good works, the tax collector approaches God in deep humility, fully aware of his own sinfulness. He knew how to admit error and then offer an authentic confession. The tax collector boasts nothing before God. His prayer echoes the opening words of Psalm 51, ascribed to King David: "Have mercy on me, O God." The crucial addition, however, is the tax collector's self-designation as "a sinner." Nothing more is reported of the tax collector's prayer. It is complete as it stands, and nothing more needs to be said of his character.

The twist in Jesus' parable comes in the common role reversal at the end. The one who presumed he was righteous was not "justified." Justified, in this sense, means being made right with God. Or, as it could be stated when reading through the lens of the gospel writer, he wasn't thinking and acting in a Christ-like fashion. However, the one who was so acutely aware of his *unrighteousness* "went down to his home justified." He was prepared to come before God with no bargaining chips of self-righteousness and a litany of good works (as meaningful as those good works may be), but simply with the humble acknowledgement of his own sinfulness and a willingness to receive God's love, grace, and mercy. That's why the 2nd point of our congregation's Mission Statement proclaims, "Receive and openly share the love of God." Note that it begins with receiving that love.

So it needs to be asked in all seriousness: **How aware are you and I of our own sinfulness, including any self-righteousness and contempt for others?** I'm not talking about an awareness steeped in a self-loathing, self-hatred kind of way – for that in itself is sinful as well as deeply harmful, emotionally and spiritually. Writing in *Christianity Today*, biblical commentator Willie Dwayne Francois, put it into proper perspective this way:

Guilt without growth is trivial. It is not enough to announce your sins without a sincere hunger for change. Remorse is not a good alibi for spiritual stagnation. Self-deprecating inaction is not a spiritual maxim to be espoused. Humility before God and honesty about self should drive us to new vistas of productivity, creativity, and love.

He goes on to expand this by adding, "**Guilt is not enough on a national scale, either. We need a concerted shift from apology to action, from guilt to justice.** The redemption of America is only possible through naming sins and undoing generations of damage...guilt has to translate into...justice. We cheapen mercy when there is no forward movement, nothing percolating at the inner recesses of our soul, drawing us to revolutionize our life. Ultimately this parable is not about the Pharisee or the tax

collector. It's about the hearers, those gathered around Jesus with varying motives. We can proclaim our unworthiness, but this cannot be the permanent address of our spirituality. It's just the first step."

So the real question becomes, **How aware are you and I of our need for God's grace, mercy and forgiveness?** Perhaps we might need to up our awareness a couple of notches.

Remember, this parable is meant to be subversive. And it should be offensive. It deals with the contrast between self-righteousness and humility. When individuals and communities define their identity by contrasting themselves to their opponents, they, like the Pharisee, most often become unable to see their own errors and failings – the log in their own eye. Biblical commentator William Loader offers the following word of warning.

The message of Jesus is quite sharp: bolstering one's sense of identity by disparaging others (even when they are terrible sinners) so easily leads to illusions of grandeur and a failure to see ourselves as we really are... The answer is not to pretend the tax collector has done no wrong, but to accept our common humanity and to know that **our real value is in loving and accepting ourselves as God loves us, and not upping our value by downing others.**

We must remember that both the Pharisee and the tax collector are persons of worth in God's eyes. Both are beloved children of God. And so are we. So, therefore, are those with whom we disagree and hold in contempt. Loader concludes, as will I, this way, "We can forget trying to earn credit points with God and establishing our worth on a relative scale. When we do so we will have so much more time and space and energy for compassion, both receiving and giving it. And we 'Pharisees' need it – just as much as tax collectors."

Amen.

Resources:

Willie Dwayne Francois, "Cheap Mercy (Luke 18:9-14), christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-10
William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C...Pentecost 21", October 19, 2004.