

Let Me Tell You Why I'm Better Than You...

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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The English translation of the Bible known as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) has long been the choice of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to use as our Pew Bibles. It's also the version from which I read. It introduces today's Gospel reading, commonly called the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, this way:

"Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." (NRSV).

To get a different flavor as to what this verse means, I want to share how this has been translated from the Greek in three additional English versions of the Bible. "Jesus also told this parable...

"...to some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else." (*The Jerusalem Bible*)

"...aimed at those who were sure of their own goodness and looked down on everyone else." (*The New English Bible*)

"...to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people..." (Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*)

Given those translations, the temptation for many is to introduce this parable as a story about a pious, legalistic, dogmatic, self-righteous, hypocritical religious person who thinks he or she has God all figured out, has a lock on the right way to interpret scripture, and who considers him- or herself as morally superior to those who differ in their belief or practice of the Christian faith. I will admit that I have been one of those who used to think this is how this parable should be approached and interpreted. But I was wrong, for that understanding misses the point altogether.

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..." From a religious perspective, "other people" for progressives has too often meant those whom we considered to be moralistic, even fundamentalists. So, the real point is this: **we do not fully experience the impact of this parable if we approach it with the initial understanding that the Pharisee is the bad guy (which over the centuries**

we have been trained and conditioned to do), and that the tax collector is the good guy.

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 occupying 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 they were justified in having contempt and looked down upon.

Given this understanding, if we were to set this parable in today's context, the twist is that **the Pharisee would be cast as an example of the ideal church member**, one who participates in church functions, is a good financial pledger, and is seen as a spiritual person. That's why Jesus Seminar scholar, John Dominic Crossan, says, rather crassly, this parable would be written in this day and age like this: "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 must approach this parable.

Perhaps worse than praising his own righteousness, we learn that the Pharisee has **contempt** for and looks down on 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 neighbor has been torn away from love of God.** That's also the underlying problem with stereotypes, including those related to race and political perspective. Every time, therefore, 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 society.** This is publicly played out on the news, especially on Fox and MSNBC. And as we are currently witnessing, all this is exponentially highlighted during a campaign year. By its very nature, we are pitted against one another, deepening our **"us" verses "them" perspective.** It has become a binary of either/or, right/wrong, with no gray spectrum in the middle.

We no longer just have differences of opinions, we often *condemn* those on the other side as simply wrong, without much of any effort to understand them from their perspective. Therefore, as I have stated on previous occasions, **if we become so convinced of our own 'rightness' and the other side's 'wrongness,' then isn't our absolutism just as much a form of fundamentalism as theirs?**

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. As it stands now, recent polling has revealed that **the number one concern among voters is the threat to democracy.** The best way to deal with that, of course, is to make sure you **go out and vote.** And that, by the way, is a very Presbyterian thing to do!

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. Unfortunately, many in our society today now see that as a sign of weakness.**

The twist in Jesus' parable comes in the common role reversal at the end. The one who presumed he was righteous was not "justified." In other words, he was not made right in his relationship with God. However, the one who was so acutely aware of his unrighteousness "went down to his home justified," made right with God.

Therefore, in all seriousness, **how aware are you and I of our own sinfulness, as in choosing not to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus?** And this parable teaches us that **includes any self-righteousness and contempt for others?** I'm not talking about an awareness of sinfulness in a way that may lead to self-loathing or self-hatred in any kind of way. For that is deeply harmful, both 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. [Theologically, that's what it means to repent.]

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 expands 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.

Instead, we're seeing those who want to ban books and silence discussions in schools concerning the real history and shadow side of our country. Awareness and confession, therefore, are just the first steps. So, the real question becomes: **How aware are you and I (and our nation, for that matter) of our need for God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness?**

Remember, this parable is meant to be subversive. And it should be offensive. It deals with the contrast between self-righteousness, including our own, and humility. Biblical commentator William Loader offers the following word of warning.

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. [It's the old 'trying to take the speck out of our neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in our own eye.] 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. Therefore, so are those with whom we disagree and hold in contempt.** Loader concludes, as will I, with this.

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.

William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passes from the Lectionary, Pentecost 21", www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader.htm