

# I Thank God I'm Not Like Those People

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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

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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 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 *The Message*)

Given those translations, the temptation for many Christians is to introduce this parable as a story about a pious, legalistic, dogmatic, self-righteous, hypocrite 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 introduced 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..." "Other people" for progressives have too often included those whom we considered to be moralistic 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 Roman government. 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.

Given this understanding, if we were to set this parable in today's context, the Pharisee could be cast as an example of the ideal church member, one who participates in all the church functions, is a good financial pledger, and is seen as a deeply spiritual person. That's why Jesus Seminar scholar, John Dominic Crossan, says, rather crassly, this parable would 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 praising his own 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 torn away from love of neighbor.** That's also the underlying problem with stereotypes, including those related to racism, which we have been studying. 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. **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. And as we are currently witnessing, all this is exponentially highlighted during a presidential campaign year. By its very nature, we are pitted against one another.

**We no longer just have differences of opinions, we often they despise those on the other side.** 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.

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 [I'm sorry, it's hard not to think about the election in this context], 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 apology.** 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." In other words, he was not made right in his relationship with God. Or as it could be stated, he wasn't thinking and acting in a Christ-like fashion. However, the one who was so acutely aware of his unrighteousness, we are told, "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 2<sup>nd</sup> point of our congregation's Mission Statement proclaims, "Receive and openly share the love of God." Note that it begins with receiving.

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. Rather, **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, or so. Remember, this parable is meant to be subversive. And it should be offensive. It deals with the contrast between self-righteousness and humility.

Biblical commentator William Loader offers the following word of warning. It was written a few years ago but is also remarkably applicable today.

**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 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. 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.