

NEW TRUTH FROM AN OLD STORY 6

“The Pharisee and The Tax Collector”

Luke 18: 9-14

Over the past few weeks we have heard Jesus telling stories; some humorous, some serious, all interesting. Today we'll hear another. In most of his stories, there is an obvious hero, and an obvious villain, but not so clear today! In The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector...who plays which role? With which one would you choose to identify?

The Pharisee looks like the hero at first glance. He is righteous, and morally circumspect. He keeps the law, and obeys God's commands. He practices the rituals, and fulfills the requirements for being a good Jew. He sure looks like the hero, but so often in Jesus' parables, he plays the villain role.

The only other character in this story is the dishonest Tax Collector, sometimes called the Publican. He was usually lumped together in numerous lists of seedy people including; prostitutes, adulterers, and other notorious sinners. He was most often a Jew, who had 'sold his soul' to the Evil Roman Empire by accepting a job collecting taxes (and extorting bribes) from his fellow countrymen. He did play a significant moral role in that society...he was the one everyone else could look down on! He was the lowest rung on the bottom of the sinner's totem pole! I wonder what 'sinner' occupies that status in our society today? Let's hear the story. As best you can, try to imagine you are hearing it for the first time.

⁹Then Jesus told this story to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else: ¹⁰“Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector. ¹¹The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don’t sin, I don’t commit adultery, ¹²I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’ ¹³”But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ ¹⁴I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored.”

As the Chaplain and assistant coach, I used to tell our Football team at DWU after a particularly devastating defeat that humility is an admirable quality...unfortunately there is usually only one way to get it. This story was designed to help the Pharisees – all us Pharisees – get it! After hearing the story, and because our familiarity with it has in many ways domesticated it, we naturally choose to identify with the Tax Collector, don't we? I certainly will not discount that there may well be humble sinners in our midst today, fully aware of their sin, looking for God's mercy. But we are also fooling ourselves if we too easily dismiss this message for some other Pharisees among us, while we walk away thinking we're the Publican, satisfied that this story is not about us, while humility oozes out our pride lined pores. Let's hear the story again, in a little different fashion, maybe this will help: Let's call it the Parable of the Deacon and the Drug Pusher. (found in a sermon on the internet)

As Baptist Bob walked into church one Sunday morning, he was disgusted to see Larry Lowlife there, for Larry was a drug pusher who had just gotten out of jail. Bob warned some of the ushers to keep a close watch on Larry because he was a no-good crook. Before the offering, it was Bob's time to pray. He walked proudly to the microphone and began to pray using his religious voice, "Almighty Gawd...I thank Thee that I've been a deacon in this church for 20 years. I even remember when I built this building using my own two hands. And I thank Thee that I haven't missed a single Sunday for over ten years. There were times, O Lord, when I was sick, but I came anyway. And Father, thou knowest, I used to sing in the choir, until I was persecuted by the song leader who wouldn't sing my style of music—but I can endure persecution just like Thou didest. Thou hast blessed me financially so I've been able to give you much more than 10 percent.

I Thank thee that I'm morally pure for I don't drink, and I don't cuss on Sundays, and I don't smoke unfiltered cigarettes and I don't use drugs or sell them—like someone who is among us today.

Lord, we need more people just like me in our church. And, Lord, help everyone to come out tomorrow night at 7 p.m. at Oak Park field to watch our church softball team slaughter the Methodists, and, by the way, bless the gift and the giver. AMEN.”

After napping through much of the sermon, Baptist Bob strolled out of church feeling good about himself because he made it through another Sunday. He liked leaving church because he didn't have to think about God again until the next Sunday. Meanwhile, Larry Lowlife was slouched on the back pew. After hearing the message about God's forgiveness, he slipped to his knees, and began to pray. Holding his face in his hands he sobbed quietly, “God, I'm the dirtiest sinner in this town. I'm so sorry. I don't deserve it, but is there any way you can wash away my filthy mistakes? Please, God, I need you!”

I tell you, it was Larry Newlife, not Baptist Bob, who went home that day right with God. For he who struts his stuff before God will eventually be slapped down. But when you admit you are like dirt compared to God's purity, He'll pick you up and clean you up.

Or maybe this version will help us center our attention:

Two people went up to church to pray, one an evangelical and the other, a person who experienced same-sex attraction. The evangelical stood up and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like all the other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this homosexual. I have my quiet time every day and I witness to my neighbors.” But the person who experienced same-sex attraction stood at a distance, not even looking up to heaven but saying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And Jesus said, "I tell you, this person, rather than the evangelical, was right with God when he went to his house. For those who think they've got it made will be humbled, but all who realize their true condition will be raised up."

The point of today's parable is obviously humility, and especially humility as it concerns how we relate to God. We are going to see in the example of these two main characters, two very different understandings of humility and two very different approaches to relating to God. There are a number of valuable lessons we all must learn today. The first two come directly from the Greek NT translation of these verses:

1. THE PHARISEE PRAYED WITH HIMSELF.

We miss this in our English translations, but the literal rendering of this phrase is most telling: "*The Pharisee stood, and prayed with himself.*" This prayer may have been addressed to God, but it was all about himself. He uses "I" at least 5 times in these 2 verses. He focuses entirely on himself. Let's consider what/how he thought of himself.

a. He saw himself as a saint. His self-righteousness is almost palpable in this passage isn't it? He plays on his religious status in the community; standing in the prominent place in the temple for all to see, and not so quietly reminds God, and the audience of his outstanding spiritual qualities.

b. He compared himself to others. Always a suspect task to use any other human person to compare with ourselves. We can always find someone better than ourselves, and conversely, we can always find someone worse than we are. Using others as a standard to measure our righteousness is silly.

c. He trusted his own abilities. He went to great lengths to point out to God exactly how lucky God was to have him on His team. He tithed and he fasted twice a week, not the normal once a year required of other Jews.

He probably joined with many other Pharisees who fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, the days Moses is supposedly to have ascended to the mountain to meet with God, and Thursday, the day he descended with the Tablets of commandments. Also of note; Mondays and Thursdays were market days in the Middle East, so the largest crowds could see these foolish Pharisees with white painted faces standing gauntly in the temple or market square where all could observe their sacrificial fasting!

d. He needed nothing from God. His prayer may have included a cursory mention of gratitude, but it was not gratitude to God, it was gloating about his greatness. His prayer asks nothing of God, for he needs nothing from God. I suppose we can go overboard with our requests, but God's Word says that we are to make our requests known to God, and God will answer them. Let's contrast this to the Tax Collector:

2. THE TAX COLLECTOR SAW HIMSELF AS THE SINNER

Again we must turn to the Greek NT for this insight, missed in most English translations. The Greek NT very clearly included the article translated "THE" in front of the word sinner. *"Be merciful to me O God, for I am THE sinner."* It gives us the impression that this man was so overwhelmed with his sinfulness, that he considered himself a sinner par excellence, or that his sins were so egregious, he was the only real sinner in the world. So obviously in contrast to the Pharisee, number one:

A. He saw himself as a sinner. No pretense here, simple admission of recognition of his status before God. This is such an important first step in meeting God. No one every worries about being found, until they recognize they are lost! This guy realizes without question, he is lost. I think part of the reason Christianity is not advancing as it should be in this country is our American unwillingness to admit we are sinners.

We are coached and coddled from the cradle that we are victims, that it's not our fault, that someone else is responsible, that when we stand face to face before God with the scroll of our lives stretched out, we look for someone else to blame, instead of just admitting, "I am the Sinner."

b. He compared himself to God. Unlike his Pharisee judge, he knows better than to try to compare himself with any other human. He is the lowest of the gutter-dwellers, and has nowhere else to look but up! In comparison to God, we are no different. God is our standard, and though morals and mores around us shift and slide, the mirror of measurement God will use to evaluate our lives, will be a picture of Himself. Of course we'll never measure up, but that gives us no right to lower the standard. Of course we'll never achieve His perfection, but that remains our goal. Of course it won't happen in this lifetime, but we must (literally) die trying!

c. He trusted God's abilities. No amount of whining and justification here. No recital of his respected resume, just pure admission that only by the mercy and grace of God does he have a prayer! His use of the word 'mercy' is interesting. It carries the weight of acknowledging that God's sacrifice of His only Son is what makes his potential salvation possible. I wish we might remember that too. It is not our tithing, as much as I believe in tithing as the minimum standard of giving for all Christians. It is not our fasting, as little as I know about that. It is not our avoidance of certain sins that impresses God, and saves us; it is our surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, won by God on the Cross of Calvary that saves us!

d. He needed everything from God. He throws himself on the mercy of the

court, knowing full well, he has nowhere else to fall. He doesn't try to impress God with his credentials; he beats his breast, repeatedly, symbolizing the wretchedness of his heart, and his desire to have it washed clean.

3. TRUE HUMILITY SEES THINGS AS THEY REALLY ARE

As we close today, we turn again to the bottom line meaning of this parable: The proud will be humbled, and the humble will be honored. Pride and humility are such seductive and illusive things. C.S.Lewis in his book The Screwtape Letters notes it. When the Christian is gaining some humility in his life, his demon tormentor is instructed to make him proud of his humility. I see the opposite sometimes too. I see people wearing a false humility, that really only partially conceals a core of self-righteous pride. I'll admit I struggle with Pride, Self-confidence, humility, and even honesty when it comes to my relationship with God. That being said, this truth must be remembered: True humility sees things as they really are. We must take off our 21st Century, Evangelical, Got it all together, Rose colored glasses, and see this final lesson:

The Pharisee saw himself as something great, which he wasn't.

The Tax Collector saw himself as helpless sinner, which he was.

I guess if the truth be told, we have to see ourselves as both these characters in this story. We are helpless sinners, and at times we are self-righteous Pharisees. I think it might be helpful to close by thinking about something from the life of the Great Apostle Paul. He knew a thing or two about being a Pharisee; he was one. He also knew a thing or two about being a sinner, following a lightening bolt wake up call.

I noticed a curious evolution of thought in the Apostle Paul's letters. In Galations, which is perhaps, his first letter he refers to himself as "Paul an Apostle". In I Corinthians 15 in the heyday of his work he writes, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle." In Ephesians 3 written toward the end of his work and life he can

only speak of himself as being 'the very least of all the saints,' and saint was the normal early Christian word for a member of the church.

And at the end of his life and illustrious career, in I Timothy, he speaks of himself as the foremost, or 'chief of all sinners.'

The reason is not hard to understand. The older he became the nearer he came to Jesus Christ and the nearer he came to Christ the more he saw the difference between himself and the Lord of all good life. The final cure for self-satisfaction is to set our life beside the life of Christ. Then there is no room for self-congratulation any more.

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He compared himself to _____

He trusted his _____ abilities

He needed _____ from God

2. THE TAX COLLECTOR SAW HIMSELF AS _____ SINNER

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3. TRUE HUMILITY SEES THINGS AS THEY REALLY _____

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The Tax Collector saw himself as helpless sinner, which he _____

