

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector
Luke 18:9-14
June 24, 2018
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When I was in grade school, I'd rush home in the afternoon and flip on the TV to watch my favorite afternoon shows. There was Batman, the Brady Bunch, Gilligan's Island, and a rerun of an old Western series. "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty 'Hi Yo Silver!'" The Lone Ranger, starring Clayton Moore, with Jay Silverheels as Tonto. One of the reasons I liked that show as a kid was that there wasn't any ambiguity. You never worried that the Lone Ranger was going to turn evil. The signs were clear, if not completely politically correct: good guy – white hat, white horse, white teeth, clean-shaven. Bad guy – black hat, black horse, black teeth, black robe, beard. You knew who was good and who was bad, and you knew that good always won.

On the surface, Jesus tells his parables with the same kind of clarity. When you read them the first time, it's clear who's good and who's bad. The servant who buries his master's money so as not to lose it is good. The rebellious son who fritters away his inheritance is bad. The man who stops to help the robbery victim in the road is good. The two people who walk by that victim without stopping are bad. See, this is easy!

Until you look closer. The good servant who protects his master's money is called "wicked." The prodigal son who wasted his inheritance returns home to a party in his honor. The man who stops to help the robbery victim was a despicable Samaritan, while those "bad guys" who didn't stop were a priest and a religious leader. All of a sudden, it's no longer easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Where's our Kemosabe when you need him?

In this sermon series on the parables, we're learning that Jesus gets a kick out of turning the tables on social conventions. That applies to our passage for today. A quick look at the cast list reveals clear lines of demarcation. The opening line sets the stage: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." The crowd would have known that the good guy is the Pharisee, the religious leader who dutifully fulfills his obligations. The bad guy is the tax collector, the traitor who robs his own people while working for the Roman Empire. But once Jesus is done telling it, the one who leaves the temple justified is not the Pharisee, but the tax collector.

I feel like I say this a lot, but I have a real problem with Jesus and this story. I struggle with the implications of the conclusions Jesus draws based on the actions of these two men. First, I have trouble with the Pharisee ending up as the bad guy here. Look at his resume: he's a Pharisee, one of the chief religious leaders of the time. He comes to worship regularly and has given his life to serving the church. He fasts twice a week when only once was required, and he honors God through sacrificial giving. I bet he even sings all the words to the hymns, even the ones he doesn't like. Or at least he lip-syncs. And for goodness sake, he's in the temple praying! This is the kind of person you want in your church, right?

On the other end of the spectrum, the good guy in this parable ends up being the tax collector. This man is lifted up as exemplary, and yet he approaches God as this self-denigrating groveler who can't even turn his face to God. Based on this example, how low do we have to go? Do we have to roll around in the dirt for awhile and compare ourselves to worms in order to make the cut? I once said in a communion meditation that we are not worthy to come to the table and yet God invites us anyway. After worship, a very upset parishioner stormed up to me and

said, “My whole life I’ve been told I’m not worthy. I would think that church is the one place where I am worthy!” Point well-taken. How worthy or unworthy do we have to be for God?

So I’m having trouble agreeing with Jesus’ conclusions here. I’m having trouble reconciling who these people are with who I think they should be. In my version of the story, it’s very clear who wears the white hat and who wears the black hat. And I’m tempted to draw the same distinctions in life, as well, between who’s good and who’s bad. People who pray, who tithe, who live out their faith are good. People who don’t do those things, or who don’t do them in the way I think they should, are bad, even if they ask for mercy. I’m gonna have to disagree with Jesus on this one.

It’s probably a good sign you’re wrong if you disagree with Jesus. I’m trying to make him fit my worldview instead of letting him transform it. My problem is that I’m trying to understand the character of the Pharisee and tax collector. Instead, maybe I should be exploring what the story tells me about God’s character, a God who extends grace to both of these people, regardless of how over-worthy or under-worthy they think they are.

Obviously, the Pharisee does some things wrong here. First, and this is a bit picky, aren’t you supposed to pray with your eyes closed? If so, how did he see the tax collector? It reminds me of the prayer before Thanksgiving dinner, when I have one eye closed and one on the turkey.

The Pharisee’s other prayer faux-pas are more egregious. Just because the Pharisee is religious doesn’t make him righteous. All the things he puts in his laundry list of good deeds are worthy of praise, but his achievements are not in question here. There’s a good chance God knows your resume, so no need to recite it. Notice that what he lists is measurable: numbers of times he fasts, amount he gives. It’s like reading the back of his spiritual baseball card.

But authentic faith isn’t measurable. If I go to church or give my money or serve on a committee, I can measure what I’ve done. But you can’t measure grace. Or forgiveness. Or repentance. I wonder if the Pharisee spouts his stats as a way to avoid the harder questions of faith and more demanding issues that confront him.

Do we do that? Do we shy away from the challenges to our faith that we see on the street corners of our community and the borders of our country because it would require something more from us? There are things going on in our community and our nation that demand a response from people of faith, but that’s a lot harder, more challenging, riskier than just meeting the basic spiritual requirements.

The problem isn’t that Pharisee was doing wrong things. It’s that he was doing right things for wrong reasons. He does all the talking and none of the listening. He assumed all his good deeds earned him good standing with God. He forgot that good standing isn’t earned; it’s given as a gift. And to make matter worse, he lifts himself up by putting someone else down. He uses the tax collector as Exhibit A to prove how worthy he is of God’s attention. “I should be praised, God, because I’m better than that person.” We’d never say what the Pharisee said – out loud, at least. Have you ever caught yourself wondering, “Why can’t other people just be more like me?”

But isn’t that just human nature? Isn’t it almost an involuntary reaction to compare ourselves with someone else? Anytime we walk into a new situation, the first thing we do is look around at others to see how we fit in. We gravitate toward those in the white hats, who are like us, and create space and distance from those least like us. It’s human nature to want to feel good about ourselves, and one of the ways we can do that is to look around us at those who are less fortunate, less motivated, less privileged, less affluent and say, “Look down there! There but for the grace of God go I.”

But saying that statement implies that the person down there isn't a recipient of God's grace, as if we have the power to draw those boundaries. The God I worship extends grace to everyone, even the people that I so readily place at the other end of the spectrum from me. God can be so frustratingly merciful sometimes! We delude ourselves into thinking we are so much different from those whom we don't want to be like, which makes it easier for us to dehumanize them, discriminate against them, talk about and treat them as objects, when in reality we are bound together by our common humanity. Technically, the Pharisee tells the absolute truth in his prayers. He is all the things he says he is. But he misses the true nature of his blessing. He is not who he is because of himself, but because of God's blessing, and his God is the same God as the tax collector's God. The Pharisee wants to build a wall between them, forgetting that Christ has already built a bridge that connects them.

What I believe Jesus is pointing out here is the importance of coming to God in prayer just as we are, not padding our spiritual statistics like the Pharisee. Catholics call this confession, a word that makes us Protestants cringe. But confession isn't about slipping into a telephone booth to share your darkest secrets and say a few Hail Marys. Confession is simply presenting your real self to God. It's bringing before God not the person we hope to be or the person we think we should be, but the person we really are. Prayer is a time for us to speak openly and honestly with God, even if we can't do that with anyone else, and then to receive the gift of mercy that God has to give each one of us.

That's the beauty of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. None of us are worthy to be welcomed here, and yet all of us are. The church is the only institution in the world whose membership is based on our unworthiness as a member. I don't say that to put us down, because we're good people! But none of us can earn what we receive here. All of us – Pharisees, tax collectors, thieves, rogues, adulterers, those who think they have it all together, those who know they'll never have it all together – are welcomed into this place.

So maybe the most appropriate prayer here isn't "Look at how great I am" or "Look at how sinful I am." Maybe the most appropriate prayer is the old slave prayer used by Dr. Martin Luther King at the end of his sermons: "O God, I ain't what I ought to be, and I ain't what I'm gonna be, but by your Grace, I ain't what I used to be." Thanks be to God.