

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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Luke 18:9-14

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

NOT A VERY GOOD TEXT?

Many Presbyterian Churches celebrate this last Sunday in October as Reformation Sunday. As a result, the usual Scripture lesson from the lectionary is displaced by biblical texts that were important to the Reformation. We don't always get to hear the prayer of the Pharisee who thanks God that he is not like the other people ... those thieves, rogues and tax collectors.

Instead we hear sermons thanking God that we're not like those other “denominations” ... you know the ones I'm talking about, those who don't have their theology straight. I guess this text isn't a very good one for Reformation Sunday. The Pharisee who criticizes others doesn't come off very well in this parable. He doesn't go home justified before God.

But, not to worry, I have another approach I can take with this text. In our church this is not only Reformation Sunday; it's also Stewardship Sunday. It's that Sunday when I preach about the importance of the tithe. Give ten percent of what you have to the Lord and you'll be amazed at what God can do with the other ninety percent. That's true.

The trouble is that this text doesn't seem like a very good one to make that point either. We learn in our lesson for today that the Pharisee is a person who tithes.

He gives more than what tradition required. He gave ten percent of everything ... before taxes! And yet we know ... because we've heard this parable before ... that the Pharisee is not justified before God. He made it to worship, but he didn't get a thing out of the service.

## PHARISEE REDEFINED

And so we lay our contempt upon the ancient Pharisee. In fact when you look up the word "Pharisee" in some dictionaries one definition of the word is someone who is a hypocrite. Sometimes the preacher is so hard on the Pharisee that the people who talk about the sermon at the local restaurant say,

"Thank God I'm not as arrogant and boastful as that old Pharisee."

And when that happens, of course, we know that everyone has totally missed the point of the parable. Instead of learning the lesson that parable teaches, we have become yet another example of this parable.

We too are in danger of being overly optimistic about ourselves and overly critical of others. And, this parable teaches us that if your goal in worship is to go home justified, that is if your goal is to go home feeling right with God and right with your fellow men and women, then passing judgment on someone else is not the way to go.

So, in order for us to hear this parable correctly, the first thing we need to do is not be so critical toward the Pharisee. We need to take a more sympathetic look at this religious leader.

I would contend that he's not the villain that some have portrayed him to be. He's a good person; he's a devout person. He's the kind of person who would sing Amazing Grace on the way to church.

He's the kind of person who would look at some sinner and say "there but for the grace of God go I." He's the kind of person who takes his commitment to the church seriously. He would be an elder or a deacon. He would lead the church in a spiritual retreat. He knows about the Bible and prayer because he is committed to both.

And if that doesn't convince the preacher to lay off the Pharisee, one commentator suggested that we consider his commitment to tithing. It's people like this Pharisee who pay the preacher's salary!

As it is with many of Jesus' parables there's a sense that his message isn't fair. Here is a man who does the right thing and who obeys the Ten Commandments. In fact he does even more than that. He goes above and beyond what is required by the commandments. He is an exemplary person in every sense of the word.

The Pharisees as a group were the ones who made sure that the words of the prophets ... the words of Isaiah, Micah, and Amos were included in the canon of Scripture. The Pharisees worked hard to bring about a society based up justice and righteousness. The Pharisees longed for what Christians long for ... that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It was the Pharisees who dreamed of a day when all the nations would stream into Jerusalem and enjoy God's just and compassionate rule.

In fact the theological ideas of the Pharisees laid the groundwork for the ministry of Jesus. Today's Jews trace their spiritual heritage to ministry of the Pharisees, and that's why some Jews find it very insulting when we talk about Pharisees in such negative terms.

Oh, to be sure, there were some Pharisees who didn't live up to their calling just as there are many Christians who don't live up to their calling either. Jesus talked about the hypocrisy of some Pharisees in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Matthew. But, even on this occasion Jesus acknowledged that they had their theology straight. Jesus said that his followers should do what they say but not what they do.

A GOOD MAN GONE WRONG

But, the Pharisee in this parable was not a hypocrite. He was one of the good ones. He fasted twice a week which was a sign that he was sorry for his sins. He tithed not just to keep up the temple but also so that compassion and care might be shown toward the poor of the land.

The Pharisee in this parable was a seriously religious person. He spent every day of his life working to make the kingdom of God a reality on earth. And he wanted everyone else to shape up and get with the program.

Now it's good to encourage others in their walk of faith, but at some point encouragement changes to nagging and nagging changes to criticism and criticism changes into outright condemnation. And in our condemnation of others we become blind to our own faults before God.

You know how this works. In the church people say things like, "Why am I always the one who has to serve as an elder or a deacon? Why am I always the one who has to teach Sunday school?"

Why don't these new people take more responsibility for the church? It's their church too? Why do the old timers have to do all the work? If everyone gave generously like I do we wouldn't have financial problems in our church."

They pray almost like the guy who checks out cell phone reception on that funny commercial. "Lord, do you hear me now? I need some help down here! I'm the responsible one, and these other people you've sent me are not doing their part."

A critical spirit invades the church; seriously religious people become harsh and cold. We may go through the motions of worship, but we sense that something is wrong with our church.

Outwardly nothing seems to have changed. Our order of worship is still the same. We still have a call to worship, a prayer of confession and a sermon. We haven't changed the bulletin in years. But, when we get through the worship service we realize that something was missing.

Maybe the pastor's sermon didn't speak to my needs. Maybe the music wasn't so inspiring. Maybe the service needs to change in some way. We're not sure what it is, but we go home knowing that something is just not right.

Maybe we need a new preacher or a new music director or a new order of worship. Maybe things would be better if our church was more formal. Or maybe things would be better if church had a service that was more informal and praise oriented.

Sometimes it is the pastor who feels spiritually drained and dead after the service. Ministers sometimes say things like, "I don't know what to do about this congregation. They don't want to change in any way. Maybe it's time for me to move on."

All of those things could be true. Sometimes a church needs a new minister or sometimes a minister needs a new church. Sometimes a change in the music director or a new order of worship is needed. Sometimes a church must go in a new direction in order to have a service that is meaningful to people.

But, often I have found that the problem doesn't lie with the minister or the congregation or the music director or the order of worship. The problem is with our attitude toward others.

We want to point at others and say that they are the problem, and when that happens we become spiritually crippled. Our ability to worship is hindered by a critical spirit. I still think that old hymn puts it well, "... not my brother or my sister but it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

## SINNERS IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

In the Christian faith, we do not compare ourselves to others, and we certainly do not compare ourselves to the lowest common denominator. Yes, we're better than those who break the most basic of commandments. Yes, we may be more faithful in our religious duties than many others.

But, where does that get us when we come into the presence of God? How do our good deeds and qualifications look then? The Bible tells us that in the holy light of God's presence even the best of us look pretty bad.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector tells us in story form what the Apostle Paul told us in prose, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Until we know we are sick, we usually do not go to a doctor. And until we know that we are sinners, we do not understand the importance of relying totally on the grace of God for our salvation.

At Bible study this past week someone pointed out that we sin even in our best actions. In other words, quite often even the good things we do are done for the wrong reason or from motives that are mixed.

Let me give you an example of how that works. A company has said that every time an eagle is scored on the PGA tour (for those of you who are not a golfer an eagle is an extremely rare and low score) but when that rare event happens this company will make a rather large contribution to St. Jude's Hospital.

The television commercial advertising this program shows children in the hospital watching golf on TV and cheering every time an eagle is made. The viewer is supposed to be touched by the fact that the PGA tour and this company are so compassionate and giving. I'm glad that St. Jude's gets the money, but when I see this commercial I also see a company using sick children to boost their image.

The Bible tells us that this is how it is with all of us. Sin permeates the human condition. And that's why in this particular parable, the model for how we should pray is not the truly good Pharisee but the truly bad tax collector.

## TAX COLLECTOR

Again, preachers have often messed up in their portrayal of the tax collector. We act like he really wasn't that bad a person. And if we do that, we reduce the parable to level of an after school special.

Trust me. The tax collector was a really bad person. He was a Jew who collected taxes from his own people in order to fund the invading Roman Empire. Can you imagine the level of contempt that this would create among the tax collector's own people?

I've thought about a modern equivalent of the tax collector, and it occurs to me that he was like an American who raised money through a sham charity to fund Al-Qaeda. What do we think of a person who has done something like this? We hold them in utter contempt. As my father used to say, "We not only want to put them in jail we want to put them under the jail!"

If such a person would come to church and want to repent, do you think we would accept their repentance? No, we wouldn't. We would hold them up as examples of what it means to fail in every way. Thank God I'm not like those folks. I love my country. I would never betray her.

But, suppose in one horrible moment, the person who did betray their country was able to see clearly what they had done? Can you imagine the anguish of that moment? Can you imagine the shame? I think that's what happened to the tax collector.

The details of the story seem to suggest this interpretation. He beat his breast, the traditional sign of deep sorrow when someone dies. He hid in the corner of the temple in shame. He lay face down on the floor, not able to look toward heaven or toward his fellow Israelites. And he cried out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

## SINNERS ALL

We hear so much these days about making worship user friendly. We don't want to have any symbols in our sanctuary (like a cross!) that might scare someone away.

Instead, the sanctuary becomes a concert hall in which the seats are comfortable and the music is always happy and positive. And we preach sermons that often seem like sanctified versions of the Dr. Phil show. Quite often we reassure ourselves that we're right and they're wrong. We pray,

“Thank you God for putting us on the winning side and giving us the victory over our enemies. How could those other people be so stupid?”

We spend time talking about sin, but it seems to me that we are always worried about somebody else’s sin. We pray, “Thank you Lord that I’m not like those Muslims ... or thank you Lord that I’m not like those fundamentalists ... or thank you Lord that I’m not like those liberals ... or than you Lord that I’m not like those conservatives.”

When sin is mentioned we think about the sins of others, but we often do not think about our own sin. Like the Pharisee we often think of sin in terms of crimes. Sinners are those who betray their country or steal or are sexual predators. And so we approach God with a proud heart instead of a broken heart. We say, “Thank you God that I’m not like those other people.”

And we forget how deep the problem really goes. We forget that sin is not just a thing that we do but a broken condition that pervades the whole human enterprise. I’m talking about sin with a capital S, what theologians call original sin.

We were talking about the story of Adam and Eve in Sunday school a few weeks ago, and I said that the story of Adam and Eve is the most historical story in the whole Bible. By that I meant that the story of Adam and Eve is not only the story of the first man and woman but also our story as well.

When God comes to see us in the cool of the evening we suddenly realize to our horror that we are not appropriately dressed for the occasion. All our righteous deeds do not cover us. Indeed as the prophet put it, they are like filthy rags that fall away and leave us exposed to God’s judgment.

In traditional Reformed theology we refer to this state as total depravity. That sounds terrible doesn’t it? We might be a little messed up but surely we’re not totally depraved. That’s someone else. That’s the guy whose story is being portrayed on America’s Most Wanted.

Certainly, we’re not as bad as we could be. None of you ... at least as far as I know ... have had your story told on America’s Most Wanted. But, the



Bible teaches us that we should not underestimate our need for forgiveness when it comes to sin.

## TWO REASONS GRACE IS NOT EXPERIENCED

I've come to believe that there are two reasons that we do not experience the grace of God. The first is that some people think that they're so bad that they're beyond saving. Those people need to hear John 3:16. God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but so the world might be saved.

If you are like the tax collector beating your breast in shame, hear this good news. It's not too late. You can receive mercy. You're not stuck forever in a shameful way of living. Through the power of God's grace you can change. You can be saved. Your sin can be forgiven.

But, I think that the other reason that we don't experience the grace of God is more common in the church. We think (subconsciously of course) that we're so good that we don't need saving. We underestimate our need for salvation and so we don't ask for it. Like the Pharisee we ask for nothing, and that's exactly what we receive.

A right attitude toward sin and salvation is not an easy thing to grasp. Intellectually we can understand it when we are children, but all our lives we struggle to really make the basic lesson of the gospel a part of our lives.

Sometimes we're like the tax collector ... beating our breast and wondering if God can possibly forgive what we have done wrong. And sometimes we're like the Pharisee, proud of the fact that we have attended Sunday school ten years in a row and are considered to be leading citizens in our community.

But, in the end it is only by the grace of God that we see ourselves in the proper light. Humility is not something we can achieve on our own. True humility is always a gift from God.

One Christian from the seventh century wrote, "The person who has come to know the weakness of human nature has gained experience of divine power."

The Shakers taught the same message in a more lyrical way. Do you remember that song we all love that has such a lovely melody? “Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.”

We sometimes miss the point of the song because it’s in old English. But, it neatly summarizes this parable. An awareness of our sin is not a curse but a blessing, a gift from God. An awareness of sin sets us free. An awareness of our sin is the first step on the road to salvation, and it is something that we need every day of our lives.

Perhaps another famous hymn makes the point clearer. “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieved.”

Maybe that’s why some of us find that old hymn so helpful. Its mournful tune and hopeful message strike just the right note when it comes to Christian living.

Listen once again to the message of amazing grace ... grace that saves you and me. Amen.