

The Perils of Pride 10/27/2013

Luke 18:9-14

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.”

THE PARABLE TRAP

Have you heard about the “so-called” Bishop of Bling? Apparently, a bishop in Germany has spent 42 million on updating his residence.

And that includes a \$20,000 bathtub! How dirty can one person be?

Anyway, his spending habits haven’t gone unnoticed. His peers are investigating him, and the Pope has suspended him.

“Thank God we’re not like this guy. Thank God our church is not filled with that kind of corruption.”

Oh wait. That prayer sounds familiar doesn’t it?

Parables are like traps. And this trap still works after all these years.

Most of us know that in the gospels the Pharisees often attack Jesus. We assume that the Pharisees are the ones with the black hats, the ones who provide the bad example.

And so this passage is often interpreted in a very simple way. We judge the self-righteous, hypocritical ways of the Pharisee. And we say that the moral of this story is that we need to be more humble like the Tax Collector.

But, when we do this, sometimes our sermons begin to sound a lot like the Pharisee's prayer,

“Lord, we thank you that we're not like the other people, those hypocrites and overly pious, self-righteous people.

We're glad that we come to this modest church each week and listen to your Word and learn to be humble.”

Humility is a tricky thing.

It's hard to be humble because even in our “humility” we can be filled with pride and a sense of self-righteousness. We can be proud of our humility!

When I was in high school I had a T shirt that read, “When you're as great as I am its hard to be humble!”

That's the problem. When we try to be “humble” belief in our own greatness will invariably come to the fore and get in the way.

In the Worshipbook there is a prayer for those who write prayers. It goes,

“Almighty God: you have no patience with solemn assemblies or heaped up prayers to be heard by men and women.

Forgive those who have written prayers for congregations. Remind them that their foolish words will pass away, but that your word will last...”

The big problem with writing prayers for others to hear is that prayers are supposed to be addressed to God. But, often we use prayers as a way to get our way.

We are willing to serve God “in an advisory capacity.”

I remember the critique a professor leveled at a prayer I wrote when I was in seminary. He said,
“It sounds like you are informing God!”

That was the Pharisee’s problem.

He informed God instead of bringing his need to God.

SHOCK VALUE

One of the problems with interpreting the parables of Jesus is that over the years they have lost their shock value.

In order to reclaim that one commentator suggested that we should rename this parable.

Instead of calling it the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we should call it the parable of the Pope and the Pimp. (Protestants might call it the parable of the Preacher and the Pimp.)

This is what we often miss. The Pharisee really was as good as he said he was, and the Tax Collector really was as bad as he thought he was.

When it comes to religious devotion the Pharisees were absolutely amazing. They memorized the Scripture. They tithed at least a tenth of what they owned to God’s work. They really were better than the average person and a whole lot better than the riff raff.

On the other hand the Tax Collector was working for the Roman IRS. He was a Jew who had betrayed his country. Many tax collectors were rich because they charged a “service fee” on top of what the Romans wanted.

We’re not too happy about paying our taxes. But, at least the tax collectors work for our own country. At least we have some rules in an attempt to make taxation fair.

But, in those days there were no rules. And the turncoat tax collectors took advantage of that.

The religious people said, “The worst sinner in the world is going to make it into God’s kingdom before these lousy tax collectors.”

And the people said, “Amen. Preach it brother!”

So when Jesus first told this parable, the people must have been saying,

“That’s right. Thank God we’re not like that Tax Collector. Thank God we’re righteous. That Tax Collector can beg for mercy all he wants, but he doesn’t deserve mercy.”

And then Jesus throws in the line that makes everyone’s jaw drop.

“This tax collector went home justified. God heard his prayer. God forgave him.”

What made the difference? The Bible tells us. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Tax Collector was humble. The Pharisee was not humble.

But, we still have to answer a difficult question. How can we be humble? What is the path to true humility?

HUMILITY

Humility comes from being willing to recognize and acknowledge our own needs and weakness.

The Tax Collector knew that he was a terrible sinner. The Tax Collector readily acknowledged that the Pharisee was right. His unrighteous behavior had taken him to a very bad place. He was separated from God, and he was separated from God’s people.

The Bible tells us that the Tax Collector was “standing far off” when he made his desperate plea. His location gives us insight into his situation. He was at the end of his rope.

There was no other option. The only thing that the Tax Collector could do was beat his breast and ask for God’s mercy.

The Pharisee on the other hand saw no need in his life. The Pharisee felt pretty good about who he was and how things were going.

And so what he said in the Temple that day was no so much a prayer to God based on need, but a soliloquy praising his own righteousness.

The Pharisee could have been also gone home justified before God too... if only he had spoken to God. But, the Pharisee was blind to his own need.

What was it that kept the Pharisee from seeing his need for mercy?

We read it in the introduction to this parable. The Pharisee didn't trust in God. He trusted in himself, and he regarded others with contempt.

Earlier in Luke's gospel the Pharisees questioned Jesus' disciples about why their Master spent so much time with the sinners and tax collectors. And Jesus said that those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick need help right away. (Luke 5:31-32)

But, what these religious people never got was that they too needed help. They were blind to their own need, and so they never sought the help that could save them.

STANDING ALONE

Did you notice that the Pharisee and the Tax Collector had something in common?

The Tax Collector was standing far off when he made his prayer.

And when the Pharisee made his attempt at prayer he too was far off, at least he was far from the other people. The Bible tells us that he was standing by himself.

The Tax Collector stood at a distance, separated from God and the people because of his sin. The Pharisee stood at a distance, separated from God and the people because of his self-righteousness.

The result was the same. Both men were in a very lonely place.

I suspect most of us have played both roles.

Sometimes we are the Tax Collector, separated from God and the people by our sin. And sometimes we are the Pharisee, separated from God and the people by our self-righteous and self-serving ways.

Will we recognize the fact that we are in a lonely place? Will we humble ourselves so that God can lift us up?

To paraphrase the words of the poet, we must learn to see ourselves as God sees us. We must put on the glasses of God's Word and see ourselves as sinners without hope save for the grace of God.

FULL OF YOURSELF

When I would be obstinate as a child, my parents would often say, "You're full of yourself today." And of course they were right. I was so full of what I wanted and what I thought, that I was a pain to live with.

Sometimes the same attitude can get in the way of our relationship with God. Sometimes we are so full of ourselves that we have no room for God. We have no room for what we really need. We do not recognize our need.

It's like the children sermon that I read this week [or we heard this morning]. In that children's sermon the leader is supposedly going camping.

And her backpack is full of things that were important to her...a trophy, a math test on which she got an "A," a ceramic pot that she made in art class and so forth. She wanted to let everyone know how smart and talented she was.

She asked the children if there was anything else they she might need on a camping trip. She suggested that maybe she might need some food and water and so forth.

But, she had a problem. She didn't have any room. Her backpack was already full of stuff that was important to her.

But, of course it was stuff she didn't really need.

The leader then went on to tell our story for today and said that the Pharisee was too full of things that he didn't really need. He was full of himself just like the leader's backpack was too full of stuff that made her proud.

Because the Pharisee was so full of himself he didn't think he needed anything from God.

And so he received no blessing from God. He didn't receive God's forgiveness.

GOOD NEWS NOT GOOD ADVICE

What saves us? Can we be saved by what we do? Can our good works save us?

In our parable for today Jesus tells us that good works are not enough. Even the most righteous among us falls far short of God's standards.

If good advice could save us the world's problems would have been over ten minutes after Moses got down to the bottom of the mountain with the commandments.

Everyone would have said, "Oh, that's how we're supposed to live. Now I see what to do. Thank you Lord for the good advice."

But, it didn't work that way. The commandments were good. God's law was good. But, we didn't obey. And ironically sometimes those who try the hardest to keep the commandments are the very people who break them in the most profound ways.

As we discussed last week we need more than laws written on stone tablets or on the pages of a Bible. We need laws written on our hearts. We need a change of heart.

Only God can do that. Only God can forgive us. Only God can bring us together when we stand apart.

In Jesus Christ we see that God has chosen to do just that. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we are freed to live in a new way.

That seems too good to be true doesn't it? Who would have thought that God would be merciful to sinners just because they asked for mercy?

And so down through the years we have refused to trust in that gospel. Instead we continue to turn good news into good advice. Jesus knew it would be a struggle for us. So, he gave us example after example.

He said that grace is like a father who forgives and welcomes his good for nothing son back home. He said that grace is like being paid a whole day's wages when you've only worked an hour.

He said that grace is like a sinful, hopeless man who beats his breast in anguish and asks for mercy. And God grants his request.

A PARABLE ABOUT GOD

Sometimes we get too wrapped up in the details of the parable.

We wonder if it is fair that the Tax Collector is shown mercy simply because he asks for mercy. We wonder if it is fair that the truly righteous Pharisee is portrayed in such a negative light.

But, in the final analysis, the parable is not about us or the Tax Collector or even the Pharisee. The parable is about God. The parable answers the question: What is God like?

God is a God who looks upon the heart. God sees us as we really are.

And yet this God who sees the depth of our sin is still willing to show us mercy. This God who knows how low down we really are is willing to lift us up.

The Bible tells us that our "righteousness" is like filthy rags compared to the glory of God. (Isaiah 64:6, KJV)

All of us are in the same boat. We can claim nothing but our total dependence on God's mercy.

But, when we see that, when we accept that, it allows us, at least for a moment, to forget the divisions and judgments of the world. Instead of

pointing the finger at others in blame, we just stand before God aware only of our need.

“It’s not my brother or my sister but it’s me or Lord... standing in the need of prayer. Have mercy on me a sinner.”

And our request is granted. We go home justified.
We go home filled with mercy, grace and gratitude.

A man told about the funeral of his uncle.
The uncle had died of cancer at an early age.

He was a gifted man, a doctor and professor of medicine.

But, he was also a brash, self-reliant person. He lived most of his life as a pagan.

His nickname, “Turk” fit him perfectly. His humor always bordered on the obscene.

But, before his death the uncle became a Christian. And so the family gathered for the funeral hoping that the minister (and perhaps even God) had not known about Uncle Turk’s down to earth ways.

Those desires were dispelled when the minister began his magnificent funeral sermon by saying, “We are gathered together to give thanks to God that he has received unto himself this outrageous, profane man.”

The minister obviously knew Uncle Turk. But, he also knew God, the God who in his mercy forgives us and calls us home.

God knows us too. God knows who we really are.
If that doesn’t make you cringe and beat your breast, I don’t know what will.

But, God is waiting to welcome his prodigal sons and daughters home, as outrageous and profane as we are.

God have mercy of all of us, sinners without hope save for God’s grace.

Amen.