

Just Like Everyone Else

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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.”

OTHER PEOPLE

Who should we blame for the troubles in our world?

The Pharisee in today’s parable knows who to blame ... those “other people”.

Who are those “other people”?

Why, the people who are not like us of course.

You know the type ... those who steal, those who are sexually immoral, those who cheat people out of their life savings ... and so forth.

Those “other people” ...

... if only there weren’t so many of them, life would be so much better. Right?

Those “other people” are the ones who are unrighteous.

Those “other people” are responsible for dragging down our society.

Now that may very well be true.
 There are people who are a drain on society.
 There are people who are criminals and ought to be locked up.

But, are these “other people” the only ones that are guilty?
 In our lesson for today Jesus challenges not those “other people” but those who are righteous.

RIGHTEOUS

Notice that this parable isn’t directed toward those who “think that they are righteous.”

This parable is directed toward people who really are righteous.
 This parable is directed toward the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day.

In English usage, the word “Pharisee” has come to mean a person who is a hypocrite.

But, that definition really prevents us from understanding this passage.

Yes, Jesus did encounter religious leaders, including Pharisees who were (as Mark Twain might once put it) “good people in the worst sense of the word.”

But, by and large the Pharisees really were righteous people.
 They were serious about following God’s law.

In fact, they even went beyond what the law required in an effort to please God.
 If the Pharisees lived today they would receive the good citizen award.

They would be the ones raising money for charity.
 They would be elders in the church.
 They would be the ones that you wanted your daughter to marry.

So, don’t bad mouth the Pharisees.
 They are us. They are the folks who crawl out of bed on Sunday morning and go to church.
 They are the ones who actually do the work.

The Pharisees care.
 The Pharisees are righteous.
 But, even the righteous have their flaws.

TRUST IN OURSELVES

I would translate verse 9 differently from how the NRSV translates. Our translation reads,

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous ...” This translation suggests that those who trusted in themselves weren’t really all that righteous.

But, this verse can also be translated, “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves *because* they were righteous ...”

I like this second translation. It points out the difficult problem that faces us religious people. Sometimes our best characteristic, the desire to follow God’s word can lead us to make a bad mistake.

We trust in ourselves.

Now you might say,
“What’s wrong with that?
Shouldn’t we all have a positive self-image?”

And I would respond,
“Of course! We should have a positive self-image, and we should encourage others to have a positive self-image.

And there’s a great reason for us to have a good self-image.

We are God’s children.
God loves us and has reached out to us in his Son, Jesus.”

But, there’s a big difference between having a good self-image and trusting in ourselves.

When we put ultimate trust in our own ability to know and do the good, we bypass the grace of God and worship the letter of the law.

We become blind to our own shortcomings.
And inevitably this leads to putting others down.

These are the people that Jesus is talking to in our lesson for today.
He is talking to righteous people who trust in themselves and put other people down.

We know people who are like that.
And, truth be told, sometimes we are like that.

Sometimes we trust in ourselves.
Sometimes we are blinded by the belief that we alone have the answers.
And we don't have much use for anyone who disagrees with us.

Does any of this sound familiar?

TRUSTING IN GOD

In a society polarized by fear, Christians have a word of grace.
We don't have to put our trust in "deplorable" politicians.
We don't have to trust in our own ability to "make things great".

We can trust in the Lord.
We can trust in the grace of God as revealed in his Son, Jesus.
We can trust in the One who can even forgive enemies.

We can trust in the One who can even forgive you and me.

It is no accident that this parable takes place in the Temple. In the Temple you were acutely aware of who was "in" and who was "out".

Gentiles were forbidden to go past a certain point on pain of death.
Women were forbidden to go beyond a certain point in the Temple.

And finally, no one but the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies once a year to make atonement for the sins of his people.

The ministry of Jesus is going to change all that.
When Jesus dies the curtain dividing the Temple from the Holy of Holies is torn in two.
This symbolizes that fact that there is no longer any divisions in the Temple.

All of us have access to God through Christ.
And all of us are in the same boat.
Sinners without hope save for the mercy of God.

But, praise God, God is merciful.
God does not treat us as our sins deserve.
God treats us according to God's great grace.

THE PHARISEE'S PRAYER

In the parable, what led the Pharisee to trust in himself instead of the Lord?
It was his attempt to earn the Lord's favor by doing good works.

The Pharisee went up to the Temple to pray, but he doesn't really offer a prayer. He informs God, and anyone else who might be listening that he is one of the good guys."

Standing apart from the crowd he voices his "prayer",
"Thank you Lord that I'm not like everyone else.

I'm a happily married man. I've never even thought about cheating on my wife. I don't steal, and I'm certainly not like that tax collector cowering in the corner.

(Who let him in to the Temple anyway?)

In addition to being an upright citizen, I'm a religious person too. I fast twice a week, and I give a tenth of all my income to your work.

Well, that's my resume Lord.
I'm sure you know who's on your side.

Amen."

THE TAX COLLECTOR'S PRAYER

That's the Pharisee's prayer.
Contrast that prayer with the tax collector's prayer.

First, instead of standing apart from the crowd in a position of prominence, the tax collector stands in the back. Maybe he was hoping no one would notice him.

(Unfortunately, that didn't work out.
He has already been the bad object lesson of the Pharisee's prayer.)

He did not stand proudly as he prayed.
In fact, he was too ashamed to even look toward heaven. Instead, he beat his breast as a sign of deep remorse and said simply,

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

A SINNER FOR SURE

Now don't misunderstand.

The tax collector was just as bad as the Pharisee was good.

The tax collector was a sinner with a capital "S".

You see, the Romans subcontracted tax collection out to the locals.

And it worked like this: if you could collect what the Romans wanted and then extort a bit more money for yourself, you could make a good living. In fact, you could even become wealthy.

But, there was a problem.

You would be absolutely despised because you collaborated with the enemy and harmed your own people.

In the Bible there's a phrase that is constantly used, "tax collectors and sinners." The two were synonymous.

In fact most people thought the tax collectors were the worst of sinners.

So, we can't be too angry at the Pharisee for pointing to the tax collector in disgust during his prayer. He was just saying out loud what the people knew to be true.

The tax collector was a traitor.

And if there was any justice in the world, the tax collector wasn't going to heaven.

And the tax collector believed that too.

That's why he stood in the back of the Temple.

That's why he wouldn't look toward heaven.

That's why he beat his breast in sorrow as he prayed.

The tax collector prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

That's all he could pray.

There were no other options.

A SINNER JUSTIFIED

But, here's the disturbing surprise in this parable.

It's not the righteous man, the Pharisee who goes home justified.

It's the sinner, the leg man for the Roman IRS who goes home justified!

This was a very shocking parable to those who first heard it.

And if we have ears to hear, it will shock us too.
 Since when are the bad guys justified, since when are the bad guys forgiven
 while the good guys are not forgiven?

That doesn't seem fair!

According to Jesus the difference in this case is that the tax collector humbled himself while the Pharisee exalted himself. And then Jesus seems to quote a proverb, "... for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This parable tells in story form what Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. It's a verse most of us know by heart,

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Ephesians 2:8-9

We do not work so that we can justify ourselves before God.
 We do not work so that we can boast to others about what good boys and girls we are.

We humble ourselves before God and ask for mercy.
 Why? Because that's our only option.

We may be a Pharisee or a tax collector, but in light of God's glory we all fall way short.
 So what do we do?
 We beg for mercy.

And surprise, surprise ... we receive it!
 God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.
 God forgives us.

We can't boast about that grace.
 We didn't deserve it.

But, we can live in the light of that grace.
 If we know the mercy of God, we can be merciful.
 If we know the love of God, we can be loving.

GRACE IN A TIME OF FAILURE

Quite often it's only during a time of failure, that we really begin to understand the grace and mercy of God.

Perhaps we have betrayed someone.
Perhaps we have let anger take over our lives.
Perhaps we are racked with guilt for something that we did ... or something that we didn't do.

The reason the tax collector asked for mercy is because he knew that he needed it.
Maybe for the first time in his life he recognized the depth of his betrayal.

He had betrayed his country.
He had betrayed his family.
He had betrayed himself.

But, most of all, he had betrayed his God.
How painful that realization must have been!
No wonder he hung his head and beat his breast in shame.

No wonder he cried, "Lord, have mercy!"

I grew up in a church where people told emotional stories about how they came to faith.

Unlike our "buttoned down" worship services, these services were opened ended.
And the stories people told were very dramatic and unpredictable.

You could forget about beating the Methodists to the buffet on Sunday afternoon ... our services went on and on.

But, I still remember some of those stories.
These people knew that they had done wrong.
And they talked about it in great detail before the congregation!

It was their way telling how in desperation they cried out, "Lord, have mercy!"

And every one of those stories ended the same way.
The Lord had mercy.
The Lord lifted them up when everyone else was putting them down.

JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

I recognized my own sins in some of those stories.
Maybe that's why I first came to faith.

I recognized the fact that I was just like everyone else. I was ... in my own way ... a sinner in need of the grace of God.

The Pharisee in our lesson for today begins his prayer by saying,
"God, I thank you that I am not like other people ..."

But, that was his mistake.
He was like other people.
He was just like everyone else.

And so are we.
We are just like everyone else.
We have no special claim on the grace of God.

But, God has a claim on us.
God in Christ has redeemed us from a life of sin.
The guilt of our past no longer has a hold on us.
Our prayer has been answered.

God has been merciful to us.

RESTORE THE JOY

In Psalm 51 King David begs for mercy.
The Psalm says that he wrote this Psalm after the prophet Nathan confronted the King with his sin.

You may remember that King David had committed adultery and then murdered the husband of his mistress to hide the sin. The King was able to justify and hide his actions, but after he is confronted by the prophet, his sins can no longer be hidden.

He knew that he had sinned terribly.
He confessed in the Psalm that his "sin is ever before me".

He was rightly racked with guilt, and knew that his sins have separated him from the Lord.

But, he also cries for mercy.
And his cry is not based upon his own righteousness.

(His actions have made it abundantly clear that he cannot rely upon that.)

Instead his cry for mercy was based upon the nature of God.

God's love is steadfast.
God's mercy is abundant
The Lord can "restore the joy" of salvation.

Don't misunderstand.
David didn't evade justice just because he pleaded for mercy.

David's sins did have historical consequences.
The Bible tells us that justice was served in the terrible things that happen to David and his kingdom in the years to come.

But, David's plea for mercy will also be heard.
There will come a Savior from the line of David, a Savior who will bring grace and salvation to the world.

God used a person who was broken by sin and guilt to bring about a larger story of salvation.
God has mercy not only upon David but also upon the world.

God still restores joy in the lives of people who are broken by sin. God's ability to save is greater than the sins of the world.

MARVELOUS GRACE

And of course that promise comes to full fruition in Jesus.

None of us are righteous before God.
None of us can place trust in our own abilities.

But, we can trust in the mercy of God.
Like the tax collector we can be justified when we cry out, "Lord, have mercy!"

It is a mercy that prays for and forgives enemies.
It is a mercy that does good to those who persecute.

It is a mercy that stops the cycle of violence and recrimination in our world, and replaces it with a word of grace.

To paraphrase the famous hymn,
“Grace, grace marvelous grace. Grace that is greater than all *our* sins.”

The world needs that kind of mercy.
The world needs that grace.

As long as we demonize those “other people”, we will be separated from the grace of God.

But, the moment we realize that we are just like everyone else, we will recognize our need to confess our sin and trust in the mercy of God for our salvation.

God help us see and hear the truth.
We are sinners. We have fallen short.

But, when we cry for mercy, a loving God restore the joy of salvation.

Amen.