

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Like last week's parable about "*the persistent widow*" or "*the unjust judge*," this week's parable about the *Pharisee and the Tax Collector* tells the story of a lawsuit with two rival parties petitioning a judge (in this case, God himself). The Pharisee has turned prayer into a contest. His own prayer which consists primarily of telling God about all of his good points, ends up exalting himself. He accomplishes this by denouncing a tax collector. But the tax-collector is the one whose small faith sees through to the great heart of God, and he casts himself upon the divine mercy. Thus, it is the tax collector who returns home vindicated (and as I explained last week, *vindicate* is a legal term that simply describes the action taken by the judge in deciding which party wins the case). So, what Jesus seems to be saying is that if you wish to see where final vindication can be anticipated, look for where there is true penitence and a genuine act of throwing oneself upon God's mercy. It is humility (or the "peril of presumptuous prayer") that is honored here, whereas in last week's parable, what was praised was "the promise of persistent prayer."

Modern readers should understand how surprising and stunning for Jesus' hearers it would have been to learn that the tax collector was the one declared to be in the right. This would have contradicted everything they knew. Pharisees were highly respected among most Jews and would have been considered righteous and scrupulous in their efforts to obey God. The Pharisee here, for example, goes beyond all requirements of the Law. But if Pharisees were respected, attitudes toward tax collectors were close to the opposite end of the spectrum. Such persons bid for and purchased the right to collect taxes and pocketed the difference between the official amount owed and what they actually charged those being taxed. They were also considered traitors because they contracted with the ruling powers to accomplish this, and the Romans had conquered Palestine. These people were often classified with murderers and robbers, people to whom one does not have to tell the truth.

But in Luke's gospel the roles of Pharisee and tax collector have already been reversed. Tax collectors are baptized by John, become followers, eat with Jesus and are called his friends. The Pharisees by contrast, question and criticize Jesus, refuse John's baptism and reject God's gift, and although they eat with him, Jesus pronounces woe upon them. Thus, for one accustomed to Luke's portrayal, the outcome here is not all that surprising. But just as Pharisees were not villains in real life, neither were tax collectors heroes. We have to get beyond these stereotypes to understand the point of the parable which extends beyond simply locating people within categories. Here, the tax collector goes home being in right relationship with God, because God made it right. It is not something he did for

himself. He came to the temple a sinner and went home forgiven. So, what is the difference between the two prayers? The Pharisee was not so much grateful **to** God as he was grateful only when he compared himself **to others**. This is because “the moment we begin to stack up our lives against the lives of those around us, it doesn’t take long before the focus becomes what **we** do, how **we** act, what **we** perform. And that selfishness destroys whatever righteous intent there may have been at the outset.

The parable asks how our assessment of people squares with God’s assessment and raises the question of the separation of God’s people from sinful people. How do we avoid sin and yet display the humility the text calls for? It cautions against the *sin of comparison* in which we secretly judge people as less than ourselves. Soren Kierkegaard said that the parable highlights three points about penitence: *being alone with God* (for when we are alone with him we realize how far from God we are); *looking downward* (for when we see God’s holiness we realize our own wretchedness); *awareness of being in danger* before God (for if we feel safe like the Pharisee we really are in peril). In our time, the modern-day counterpart of the Pharisee would actually be welcomed into any respectable community and given a responsible position. It’s surprising how much egotism we’ll put up with when we consider the person in question to be just and clean-living.

As I said last week, prayer figures prominently in Luke’s gospel, much more so than in John and the other synoptics. This is because for Luke, “prayer is faith in action. Prayer is not an optional exercise in piety, carried out to demonstrate one’s relationship with God. It is that relationship with God. The way one prays therefore *reveals* that relationship. If the disciples do not ‘cry out day and night’ to the Lord, then they in fact do not have faith, for that is what faith does...” and if prayer is self-assertion before God, then it cannot be God’s gift of righteousness; possession and gift cancel each other.”

But in another sense, the parable is not that easy to interpret fully. While “the Pharisee is right about the kind of life he should live, he is confused about the source of that life. For while he prays to God, his prayer finally is about himself, and because he misses the source of his blessing, he despises those people God loves.” As for the tax collector, “there is no note of repentance in his speech, no pledge to leave his employment or render restitution to those he cheated, no promises of a new and better life.” But there are at least two traps here which make the parable more complex: “the minute you decide to take this parable to heart and ‘be humble’ like the Pharisee, it’s pretty hard not to also be grateful you’re not like that Pharisee.” And another trap: “to hear in the tax collector’s confession an example that we also ought to live our lives fully and entirely aware of our status as a sinner” you’ve shifted attention “away from God’s activity to your status.” Because the ultimate lesson here is that we need to shift our attention from ourselves to God, but ours is a God “who delights in justifying the ungodly, welcoming the outcast, and healing all who are in need.”

As one contemporary divine puts it, “if we are not found guilty in hearing this parable, we are deluding ourselves.” When we pray “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” this is not a mere passing appraisal, “but that which leads to judgment. Judgment without understanding. Judgment without empathy. Judgment without any attempt to see as Jesus sees. Without any action that tries to come near to the marginalized (for whom) Jesus always has regard.”

This sin of ours is the sin of dismissal. The sin of one-upmanship. The sin of appraisal and assessment before compassion.” When we size up the other person “with the assumption that our faith, our religiosity, our spirituality is somehow better,” we are guilty of that one-upmanship. We’ve devoted a lot of attention recently to Luke, but if we have learned anything in the process, it might be this: “to look beyond the obvious, the assumed, the expected in the other to a space and place of deep regard.” In the words of today’s collect,

“Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope and charity...that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command.”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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