

Sunday, August 28, 2022

An Inclusive Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus" – The Pharisee and Tax Collector)
(Message Eleven)
(Luke 18:9-14)

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Message:

The Velveteen Rabbit is the story of a little toy rabbit made of velveteen, not impressive, expensive or majestic, but loved by the little boy he belonged to. One day in the nursery he hears that it is possible for a little toy like him to become real.

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else...

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the skin horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real." "Does it

hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Jesus sets our parable this morning in the place of *prayer*, in the *temple*; this is the only story Jesus tells that is set in a place of worship.

Prayer, our venture into intimacy with God, is easy to begin but difficult to sustain; sadly, this supposedly deep desire, that is often little more than skin deep. Jesus said prayer is the primary reason we go to church; he called them, *houses of prayer*.

The two contrasting characters in our story both go to the same *church*; they both *pray* when they get there; and they are both *sinners*.

There is a widespread misconception that this parable presents two models: one noble model to be imitated; one ignoble model to be ignored. That is not really true.

Reading this parable moralistically through our Western eyes, we look for a model to imitate – as a result, we condemn the arrogant prayer of the self-righteousness Pharisee; we praise the honesty and humble prayer of the detestable tax collector.

We choose the character we feel is worthy of our imitation and refuse to deal with undesirable characters; we choose the character we like and can imitate and thank God we are not like the detestable Pharisee (and so become one).

If it were only that simple. Neither one is perfect; both are sinners, neither is a model.

Kenneth Bailey says, *"The more familiar the parable, the more it needs to be rescued from the 'barnacles' that have attached themselves over the centuries."*

In fact, this parable is less about prayer and more about righteousness, as Luke says, *"people are confident in their own righteousness and look down on (despised) others."*

Let's take a look...

THE STRUCTURE

This story, like the previous one, is built on an **A-B, A-B** structure. In between the introduction – “*two men go up to the temple to pray*” and the conclusion with the same two men “*going down*,” we are told a Pharisee stands and prays (A-B) and then a tax collector stands and prays (A-B). Then Jesus concludes with a *nimsal*, a **hint** of what the parable is really about to his listeners.

THE STORY

18:10 - “Two men went up to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

It sounds like a joke: “*Two guys, a tax collector and a Pharisee, walk into a church...*”

We assume they are going for private prayer; the first listeners would assume (and our text seems to confirm) they are going to attend **public worship**. They are both going to a place of worship at the same time. They come home at the same time (presumably when the service is finished).

The Temple – a place of public worship - is specifically mentioned. The tax collector stands “*at a distance*.” From whom? Likely, from other worshippers.

In his prayer, the tax collector specifically asks God to “*have mercy on him, a sinner*.” That would correlate with the Temple “services” held twice daily (9 a.m. and 3 p.m.) which included an **atonement** sacrifice spilling a lamb’s blood (Remember Jesus was lifted up on the cross at nine a.m. and he died at **three** p.m. cf. **Mark 15:25; Luke 23:44**).

At these sacrifices/services, the *congregation* would draw near to the altar where the lamb was being sacrificed to atone for the sins of Israel. The priest would leave the altar and enter the Holy Place. While he was gone, the people would offer private prayers (like the prayers in this story). Since the **sacrifice** of the **lamb** covered the sins of Israel and opened the way to God, the worshippers could now freely offer their **prayers**.

Every listener already knows the hero in this story is going to be the Pharisee. He is the good guy (the devout and faithful member of his community) and the tax collector is the bad guy (the corrupt, cheating collaborator with the Romans).

The strange part for the listener is that a tax collector wants to **pray** and then, is willing to go to the **temple** – with all these people around.

18:11-12 - “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”

This Pharisee stands by himself because he doesn’t want to get **contaminated**; he strives to remain **ceremonially clean** as an expression of his devotion to God. People were conscientious about this – if you touched someone who wasn’t *clean* – e.g., a Gentile, leper, woman, sinner, tax collector – you would become *unclean* and unable to enter the inner temple. So they distanced themselves from unclean people.

But this Pharisee distances himself not only physically, but also spiritually, emotionally, and personally: *“Thank You, God, that I am not like him. Except for your grace I’d be like that tax collector over there.”*

Notice his prayer begins with **thanksgiving**: *“God, I thank you...”* He understands he is what and who he is by the grace of God, that his goodness is a gift from God and that God has kept him from falling into the sins he sees others committing. He doesn’t ask anything from God; his only prayer is thanksgiving. And his prayer is taken from a prayer in the Talmud (a Hebrew collection of ancient teachings) rather than composed spontaneously.

This Pharisee *knows* he is **“righteous”** (a relationship of **acceptance** with God) because he *“fasts twice a week and tithes.”* Israelites were commanded to fast one day a year – the Day of Atonement. He fasts twice a week – 104 days a year! 103 days of extra credit every year!

He also gives a *“tenth of everything.”* Tithing was a big deal and very complex (like our tax code: are you required to tithe on products that have already been tithed on?). He doesn’t take any exemptions at all; he is open to having his tithe returns made public.

So this Pharisee is a spiritual over-achiever. He does everything required and more. He knows he is better than “those guys.” Every listener would agree.

But his prayer is the primary issue in this parable. It **betrays** him. His focus is not personal self-disclosure and his **relationship** with **God** but a **comparison** to **others**. The standard he uses isn’t his relationship with God but with others he chooses. So he **judges himself** pious and **righteous**. It’s easy to point a finger. We all do it frequently (consciously and unconsciously) and it inevitably leads to a great deal of misery.

Pride thrives on **comparisons** and his prayer breathes a spirit of pride. C.S. Lewis writes: *“Pride isn’t like other sins. Pride is the great sin, the mother of sin, the sin that gives birth to all other sins. Pride is very competitive by its very*

nature. It gets no pleasure out of having something, only having more than the next person."

We compare our possessions to their possessions; our opportunities to the opportunities others always have; their vacations to our vacation; and we find ourselves frustrated, dissatisfied, and covetous. And we wonder why.

We also do this spiritually: our righteousness to their sin, our enthusiasm to their lethargy; our piety to their impiety. How do they dare to come to the Lord's Table living like they do? Who do they think they are offering to be an elder?

We innately compare ourselves to a standard that allows us to finish where we want to. This Pharisee measures himself against a tax collector and comes out smelling like a rose. (In his soul, he knows better.) But this allows him to parade his pride.

8:13 - "*But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me a sinner.'*"

This guy is a **loser**, a misfit, a **traitor**, a failure, a scoundrel, a bully, and a **thief**. Get the picture? He separates himself because he knows he is not welcome in this temple.

He knows he messed up. He knows if God isn't incredibly gracious, he's in real trouble. This weighs so heavily on him, he can't look up. He doesn't want to make eye contact with the people he may have offended, harmed, or taken advantage of.

You can see this in young children, even in dogs (cats never look you in the eye).

He beats his breast – an expression of deep humiliation and/or sorrow; men generally would not do this; it is usually associated with women. (Only other time a man in Scripture does this is when Jesus was crucified.)

His prayer, "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner*" is what his listeners would **expect**. He makes no excuses, no comparisons, and no attempts to look good. He measures his life against God standards and realizes he is completely dependent on God's grace.

It makes no difference to God how moral or immoral we are; both the "**moral**" (Pharisee) and "**immoral**" (tax collector) must depend entirely on the **mercy** of God.

Then comes the shock no one sees coming: "*I tell you this man [the traitor, moral failure, misfit, tax collector], rather than the other [the*

devout guy, good guy, right thinker, Pharisee] *went home justified [accepted, right] before God.*" (18:14)

What!? The tax collector!? These listeners know what a **good person** looks like, and this tax collector isn't even close (the good person, normally, is the one who looks, thinks, talks, and behaves most like us).

What!? We thought this was a parable about prayer and now you're telling us it is about "righteousness?" And the tax collector wins? What!?

Let's interrupt a minute and do a "righteousness audit":

- Who reads their Bible more? The Pharisee or the tax collector? Definitely, the Pharisee.
- Who prays more? Pharisee.
- Who knows their doctrine better? Pharisee.
- Who goes to church more? Pharisee.
- Who tithes regularly? Pharisee.
- Who shows their love for God more? Pharisee. Righteous, right?
- Who's more aware of their desperate need for God and his grace? Tax collector.

Jesus calls this awareness and confession, humility (no pretending or hiding; just being real). Jesus doesn't approve of our pretending to be someone/something we are not. Apart from God, we lean into self-promotion, self-indulgence, my will being done; the **mercy** of God is the great **leveler** of people.

SUMMARY

Pharisees and tax collectors. Few of us are one or the other **all the time; most of us are some of **both much** of the time.**

There are times when we are Pharisees, when our prayer sounds more like self-congratulation, when it is hard to tell if we are addressing God, others or ourselves.

There are times when we come before God as messed up tax collectors when we need everything and go home with even more than we dared to ask for.

Jesus never says one is better than the other; he says in the *nimsal*, those who exalt themselves will be humbled, those who humble themselves will be exalted. Jesus does say righteousness is neither **earned** nor **deserved**; we are "**made** righteous."

No one starts going to church or following Jesus with the **goal** of becoming self-righteous and hypocritical. But before we know it, **there** we **are**. It's **subtle** (we're often the last to know); it's **incremental** (it occurs over time); it's **addictive** (we love thinking we're right); it's **indiscriminate** (it's

everywhere); and it's terribly **destructive** to our love, our relationships, our forgiving, our witness.

It even (often) occurs in **places** of **prayer** among people who pray.

The tax collector's life is messed up; his future seems hopeless; he's not someone to admire or imitate; he is fully dependent on grace; he has nothing left but prayer: "*Kyrie eleison! Lord, have mercy. Let the atonement sacrifice be for me.*"

The Pharisee's life appears in order; but his self-righteous pride is preventing him from experiencing God's righteousness. Both are sinners. Both need God's grace.

Jesus started a community where misfits, the hopeless, the **broken, and sinners who are **desperate** for God could come and be made **real** and be loved, where everyone is welcome: Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, male and female, Pharisees *and* tax collectors.**

No us and them...but...

- A place where **no one** is perfect, and **everyone** knows it.
- A place where no one needs to pretend they have it all together.
- A place where the number one rule is, "*Thou shalt keep it real!*"
- A place where we must be transparent and vulnerable – which is why Jesus adds the strange detail that the tax collector goes to the Temple.
- A place where healing comes because we are known, are embraced and belong.
- A place where, stripped bare of all the things we like to show God, we can still be "justified" (made righteous) – not because we prayed well, used the right words, or struck the right pose, but only because we know our God is gracious.
- A place where everyone understands this community exists and we are a part of it only because of the sacrifice of God's Son who paid a huge price so we could be together.

Our world says to be accepted we have to be as rich as Warren Buffett; as smart as Albert Einstein, as strong as Andre the Giant, as sexy as Tom Cruise. In Jesus' new community you can be as strong a Warren Buffet, as smart as Andre the Giant, as sexy as Albert Einstein, and not resemble Tom Cruise at all.

So what do we do? Here is the solution. We don't do **anything**. We don't, can't, make ourselves less self-righteous – we're sinners. The solution is in **knowing**, accepting, that we are self-righteous. The solution is in **knowing** we can't fix it. The secret is in **knowing** who can and going to **Jesus** and telling everyone we know that we have been to him and why we went there.

Jesus started this new community while he was still with us on earth. No one had ever seen a rabbi who loved the **kind of **people** this Rabbi loved.**

Prostitutes! For crying out loud! Roman centurions! He loved Gentiles and Samaritans. He would touch lepers. He even loved tax collectors!

This made the “good” people, self-righteous people really **mad**. They decided to **kill** him. They hung him on a cross until died. They put his body in a tomb and a stone in front. His disciples who loved him were devastated. They realized being real hurts!

A few days later, his Father said, “*That’s not the **end**, it is only the **beginning**.*” He rolled the stone away; he raised his Son from the dead. Jesus came out of the tomb more **alive**, more **real**, than any human being had ever been. Death could not claim him. (John Ortberg called him the Velveteen Rabbi. ☺)

And if you let him, he’ll make you **real** like the **real person** God intended you to be.

Prayer:

Father, we confess that we have messed up. Have mercy on us, for we are sinners. Father, give us the courage to acknowledge what you and everyone else knows – that our lives would be a train wreck without you, without your Son, and without your grace.

Father, having received your grace, help us to extend that same grace to others. Help us to accept and embrace those we once considered inferior, beneath us, not as spiritual as we are. Forgive our self-righteousness and judgmentalism. Give us a humble spirit. Pour out your mercy on us. In the name of Jesus our teacher and rabbi. Amen.