

OAKRIDGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Jesus Also Told This Parable

Luke 18: 9-14

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Luke is known as a great storyteller among the evangelists, and the Gospel of Luke has the most parables of all the gospels. From the beginning this gospel is explicitly identified as being for the outsider, the poor, and the oppressed and the parables reveal that sensitivity to outsiders and the socially marginalized.

So it is not surprising that in this parable Jesus is speaking to "...some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."(vs.9) It does not say they are Pharisees.

I love the way Jesus teaches using stories. Ruban Zimmerman states it this way: *"Jesus wants his dialogue partners to gain insight and arrive at the proper perspective; however he does not point an accusatory finger at them but rather sets these parables before them as a mirror."* (*Puzzling the parables of Jesus, 296*)

At first reading we might look at parables and say or think, yes, of course – we get it! It is a simple story with a straightforward answer.... But as we dig into the parable it becomes more complex, it seems like an impossible situation, it is offensive, upside down – those who do good should be rewarded, those who don't shouldn't.

There they are, standing apart from the crowd, listening as Jesus speaks, "Two men went up to the temple to pray." They literally go up because Jerusalem is on a mountain, and the devout prayed 3 times daily, at 9 am, 12 noon, and 3pm. This story likely assumes at one of those times the Pharisee and the tax collector ended up there together, yet apart.

Now Pharisees regularly appear in Luke as critics of Jesus for associating with tax collectors and sinners, but the Pharisees were also ones genuinely try to uphold the Torah, struggling in a world of Roman power and Samaritan neighbours – they are trying to please God – they work really hard at following the letter of the Law – God's law, and they are thankful for their role as leaders of God's people... so the Pharisee, standing by himself prays like this, " God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector (and he points to the man who arrived when he did, not embittered, just thankful he is not like him) – I do more than the law requires," he says, "I fast twice a week; I give more than the law requires, I give a tenth of all of my income" (Deut 14:22 says only tithe produce of the fields).

This man worked really hard at being righteous! And in fact the prayer the Pharisee is praying is likely one that was prescribed for praying out loud (Ruth Etchells in a *Reading of the Parables of*

Jesus), so he is not inventing this – it is learned behavior. He is thankful for his lot in life and giving back to prove it – righteous behavior – nothing to be sorry for.

The tax collector is standing far off – now there's a sorry person. He was known to collaborate with the Romans and to steal from the Jews. He is like the opposite of the Pharisee and has done much to go against the laws of Israel. He is always associated with sinners. Tax collectors were not considered anyone to hang out with (Jesus should know better if he wants to be a Rabbi) – what was he doing in the temple? No wonder he was standing far off, no wonder he would not look up to heaven, no wonder he was beating his breast, in an expression of extreme anguish and saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The crowd is probably thinking, this is all pretty normal, that's the way they pray – one has lots to be thankful for, the other lots to be sorry for - no surprises here.

Then Jesus delivers the twist to the parable: The tax collector was the one who went home justified – at peace with God - not the Pharisee. Could that be possible? "Yes," says Jesus "it is possible – with God all things are possible. In the kingdom of heaven things are different, humble yourself and you will be exalted." The tax collector humbled himself – he didn't give any offerings, he only asked for the mercy of God - grace. He knows he does not deserve it, but he humbly prayed.

The Pharisee does not go home justified because he did not ask for anything from God. He simply let God know why he counted himself as righteous – he trusted in himself. Yes, he was thankful, but it was gratitude that cast judgment on others and exalted him... he makes a claim to righteousness based on his own accomplishments, and so he will be humbled.

Can you think of a modern equivalent for the Pharisee? What about a lawyer?

Two men go to church to pray... the lawyer says, "God I am so thankful that I do not _____, like that person...." He may be following the law – he knows them all and keeps them all – how can you say he is bad...? But he is disdainful of others because he truly believes he is righteous. (Or what about church leaders, who know the rules and teach them, but see themselves as exceptions? Or they know others who just can't seem to follow – there is a danger of being arrogant and hard-hearted – impossible situations.

Can you think of a modern equivalent for the tax collector? What about a parking enforcement person – nobody likes them...they are just doing their job, but everybody hates them because they give tickets and cost people a lot – it's not fair... and maybe they become bitter and abuse their small amount of authority – maybe they cheat people – but they are just doing their job.

But the parking enforcement person says, "Lord, forgive me for I have sinned."

The “good” are thankful they are not the “bad” and they work hard to live the good life, to follow the laws, to do the right things, to be the right kind of Christian – this is a hard message – who would we want to be identified with, the religious leader, or the tax collector?

That’s not an easy answer – I don’t want to think I am like the tax collector. I want to believe I am doing what is good and right,

... but the point is we are all on level ground at the foot of the cross.

Our culture encourages us to be self-sufficient, to control, to make sure we have all the resources needed, to compare ourselves to others and make judgments about who is righteous, to get ahead, to put ‘self’ first. God tells us to humble ourselves and return to loving God and our neighbour as ourselves.

Jesus also told this parable and he didn’t name the Pharisees as the “...some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” So maybe this is a teaching to be applied to everyone... impossible situations... we are all capable of both. As soon as we give into the temptation to compare ourselves to others in judgment, to group people according to their sins we become more like the Pharisee.

Whether we divide between righteous and sinners, as with the Pharisee, or between the self-righteous and the humble, as in this parable, we are in danger. Anytime we draw a line between who is "in" and who is "out," this parable seems to say, you will find God on the other side. In this way the parable shows that it may not be about self-righteousness and humility or about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. This parable is about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly.

Jesus tells another parable and it leaves us with nothing to claim but our dependence on God's mercy. When this happens if we forget for a moment our human-constructed divisions and stand before God aware only of our need, then we, too, are justified by the God of Jesus and invited to return home in mercy, grace, and thankfulness.

The message is grace...at the foot of the cross we are all equal. And the good news is God loves us more than we could ask or imagine.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Focus Quote:

An obsession merely with doing all God commands may be the very thing that rules out being the kind of person that he calls us to be.

Dallas Willard

Sources:

Ruben Zimmerman. *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus, Methods and Interpretation* (2015) Fortress Press
 Chris Leonard. *Parables, Communicating God on earth* (2005) CWR
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 The Bible (NRSV)(1989)
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