

The Exalted Will Be Humbled

Luke 18:9-14

Who are you, a Pharisee or a tax collector? It is hard to read this parable without placing ourselves in one role or the other, or hearing ourselves in both people. Which of us has not felt a bit self-satisfied on a Sunday morning? "O Lord, I thank You that I am not like other people: my next-door neighbor who is enjoying a round of golf right now instead of attending worship; my friend in the other political party who does not understand your will for our nation; or even that scruffy-looking auto worker sitting two pews over. I am here every Sunday morning and would attend on Wednesday evening if we had mid-week Bible study; I pledge faithfully; I serve during the Angel Tree ministry, walk in the CROP walk and assist at Carriage Town Ministries at least twice a year."

For others of us, it is only when we mess up in a big way that we gain the humility of the tax collector. Those in recovery programs call it "hitting rock bottom." Major mistakes are sometime required to help us see our need for God's grace and forgiveness. Only then do we echo the tax collector's words, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (v. 13). Church can sometimes be a fairly hostile place for this kind of authentic remorse and humility. Our comfort with the idea that we are all sinful does not translate into the wish to hear in detail about any particular sin, thank you very much. **Laura S. Sugg**

So let's examine these two men. Pharisees were known for their extraordinary piety. It is curious that he went to the temple at all, since the Pharisees were the first to promote "the priesthood of all believers," and the locus of their religious lives was the home rather than the temple altar. This one prayed in the temple, though. The Pharisee saw his status before God to be a result of his own actions.

His prayer was about what he was doing. He gave thanks to God that he was better than the thief, the rogue, the adulterer and the tax collector. This man obeyed the commandments: he did not steal or covet, he was not unjust, nor did he commit adultery. He fasted not only on the holy days for which fasting was prescribed, but twice a week. He tithed. He was proud of his religious acts of fasting and giving and therefore justified himself. He was a wonderful church member. No pastor would have to visit him in prison, or go to civil or divorce court as a character witness for this man, nor would he ever need to be reminded for his need to be a good steward of the Lord's resources!

The other man was a tax collector. He could not be a Pharisee, since the Pharisees were particularly contemptuous of tax collectors, who consorted with Romans, handled their money, and extorted the populace. Ancient Palestinian tax collectors were not like contemporary Internal Revenue agents paid to enforce the law. They were franchisees of a corrupt system that gouged the poor and enriched the wealthy. The tax collector, by definition, was a wealthy man who paid the empire a set amount for the privilege of gathering whatever he could squeeze from his neighbors. Although he was personally responsible for the money owed by his district, he was free to collect that money any way he wanted, and anything he collected above what he owed was his profit. Tax collectors were frequently foreigners, and they often farmed out their own responsibilities to others, creating a perfect pyramid scheme of graft. This tax collector, however, acknowledged God's judgment of him and threw himself on God's mercy. This man was ashamed of his actions. His prayer was about what he had done.

According to theologian Karl Barth, both men are equally "shamed" before God, but the difference between the two was that the Pharisee was ignorant of his standing with God. The shame of both men was a result of their sin. The Pharisee had fallen into the sin of arrogance and pride because he attempted to exalt himself

above others, even God. The tax collector, on the other hand, was humiliated before God and others. He genuinely recognized his misdeeds, and his brokenness was evidenced by his beating upon his chest. Karl Barth understood the shame of both to be the result of their comparison to the holiness of God. Seen through these lenses, the beauty of this parable is that when we acknowledge we are all subject to sin, we concede two things: (1) we are unable to save ourselves because we are steeped in sin; and (2) we are totally and utterly dependent on God for salvation.

The Pharisee justified himself before God by trying to exalt himself. He prayed about who he was, what he had done, and what he had not done to put himself in good standing with God. On the other hand, the tax collector humbled himself, genuinely acknowledging his sinfulness and his desperate need for God's mercy. In the end, the Pharisee was humbled because of his self-exaltation, and the tax collector was exalted because of his humiliation. One of the key words in the passage is "justified." After the tax collector humbly prayed for God's mercy, the text says "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other" (v. 14). The doctrine of justification asks the question of how we reach a status of righteousness in God's eyes. The Pharisee trusted in himself for his own righteousness, and the tax collector trusted in God for righteousness. He did nothing to earn or deserve God's mercy. God's mercy was freely given to him. Paul said it this way: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

In Ephesians 2:8 Paul assured us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Our justification is the recognition of our guilt and shame, resulting in the confirmation of our forgiveness and our reception of God's righteousness. One of the hallmarks of church teaching is the concept of *sola gratia*, which asserts that we are justified by God's grace alone—the only means by which we inherit the righteousness of Christ. To suggest

that we can be justified by any other means is to reject the free grace of God. Paul reiterated this when he wrote, "Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due" (Rom. 4:4). **Robert Leach**

This parable tells us about ourselves as followers of Christ. If it makes us twinge with remorse at the thought of acting like the self-righteous Pharisee, it also inspires us with the humility of the tax collector. This parable also tells us about the God of mercy—the God who redeems through self-sacrifice. Our justification is not obtained by doing things—even good things like charitable giving. In fact it is not "achieved" at all—at least by us. Justification comes through God's reaching out in mercy to helpless sinners.

Jesus communicated this profound truth in this short story about two men in the temple praying. In typical Jesus fashion, he reminds us that appearances can be deceiving. The one called holy by society walked away from the temple still wrapped up in his grandiose self-righteousness. How seductive it is to trust in ourselves that we are righteous and to regard others with contempt (v. 9). We do our good duty and confess our sins each Sunday; we put our envelope in the plate. We serve the church and the world in so many ways. Hooray for us. Boo for those who do not follow the rules as we do—those whose work is detestable, who should not be allowed to sit in the same pew with us. Even if we do not take our judgment upon others to this extreme, it can be difficult to avoid looking on some with contempt when they do not conform to our expected standards of behavior, especially in regard to religious practice. The one reviled by good church folk "went down to his home justified" (v. 14a). The status quo is reversed in this story, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (v.14b and 14:11).

Jesus challenges us to avoid trusting in our own efforts, but to humble ourselves before a merciful and loving God. Trust is called for, but not trust in ourselves or in our ability to keep God's law. What is called for here is trust in God's mercy.

In 2 Timothy 4:6-8 Paul spoke of his confidence that he had "finished the race" and "kept the faith" (v. 7) and that "the crown of righteousness" was reserved for him. This might sound an awful lot like the Pharisee from Jesus' parable, but there are quite a few differences. The Pharisee stood in the comfort of God's temple; Paul wrote from prison. The Pharisee heaped scorn on others he deemed less righteous than himself; Paul affirmed that the crown belongs "not only to [himself] but also to all who have longed for [the Lord's] appearing" (v. 8).

Balance is key. We cannot trust in our ability and obedience to save us, yet we do not abandon obedience. We humble ourselves before a merciful God yet are confident in the Lord's promises. Whether Pharisee or tax collector by nature, all find welcome in God's temple. **Laura S. Sugg**

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