

SCRIPTURE

Luke 18:9–14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 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.”

MESSAGE

Open my ears that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear
and while the wave notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear,
Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God thy will to see.
Open my ears, illumine me. Spirit divine!

This morning’s gospel reading about the two men in the temple praying seems simple enough – don’t slag on other people in public as a show of self righteousness. I think all of us had a similar reaction as we listened to the familiar story. We picture the Pharisee in the Temple, dressed in fine garb, raising himself up as he put others down.

‘Thank you, Lord, that I’m not like all those others – the thieves and adulterers, the rogues. And Lord, thank you especially that I’m not like that guy. He’s the worst.’

As we let the scene play out in our heads we are filled with contempt for that preening self-righteous man who conspicuously and loudly flaunts his own virtues while denigrating everyone else. ‘What a pompous twit,’ we think. ‘So high and mighty. Lord, thank you that we’re not like that guy. He’s the worst.’

And just that quickly we become him. It’s almost scary how easy that is. We hear this cautionary tale and take stock of this proud man so as not to fall into his trap; we turn away from his example and then catch a glimpse of him in the mirror. There seems to be something

Kafkaesque going on, something inexorable and inescapable. An appointment in Samarra type of thing. The more we try to reject the example of the Pharisee, the more we resemble him.

We can't like or admire him, nor are we in any position to judge him, because as soon as we do we demonstrate the very attitude for which we condemn him. We seem to be stuck.

What makes it worse is that the alternative to the Pharisee is not attractive to us either. We all know that humility is a virtue, but how many of us would like to put ourselves in the tax collector's shoes? 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

I think many of us picture humility in a different light. We do something for somebody and when they say 'Thank you' we reply with 'Oh, it was nothing.' That kind of humility is easier for us – a kind of self-effacing modesty that appears to play down the self while really doing the opposite.

The humility of the tax collector goes far beyond simply being demure or coy. To us it seems complete self-abasement. We don't want to be proud like the Pharisee, but neither do we want to experience the abject poverty of spirit that this tax collector is expressing – especially in public.

Somehow, when presented with these two men praying in the temple we manage to feel superior to both of them – even though they represent very different things. We are smugly contemptuous of the Pharisee, while we find the tax collector pitiable and wretched.

We're not even in the story and yet we're the worst character. We'd like to pray 'Oh Lord, thank you that we're not like that guy, 'cause he's the worst!' But he is us. We're the worst. It would be funny if it weren't so sad.

Most of the time we agree with what we read in the bible. To be sure, there are passages that we struggle with, but for the most part when the bible calls certain behaviours good and commendable something resonates within us. Loyalty, faithfulness, patience – even challenging concepts like dying to our own desires make sense to us.

But it's hard to warm up to the example this tax collector sets. When we look at him we don't see humility, we see humiliation. Even though this man is supposed to be our role model in this story, he's not the hero that we want to be.

At this point we have a choice. We can simply determine that the bible is wrong on this one – that this passage is out of date and irrelevant – people make mistakes, and, in this case, Luke missed the mark.

Putting ourselves as judges and arbiters of the bible is a risky business though. Once we start down that path things get very tangled, very quickly.

In that case, could it be that it isn't the bible that is wrong, but perhaps our perception? Did we get something wrong?

It is worth noting that the bible was written in a very different time and place – a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, as it were. Many things have changed in the way that we view ourselves and each other. One such change has been the atomization of society.

What I mean by that is that our current culture privileges the individual over the group. The basic building block of society is the individual, the most important element is the individual. It's all about me.

We see it in our modern myths – it's always the lone hero who saves the day – one man breaking all the rules in a fight for justice. It's reflected in our politics; we vote for a leader, not a party. This past election was particularly bad for this – it was essentially a mud fight in which leaders smeared other leaders to show why they shouldn't have the opportunity to govern. Very little discussion of policy. All about the individual.

We raise our children to esteem individuality above all other values – only you can decide who you are, who you want to be, etc & etc. In fact, to listen to some educators and parental advisors, the only thing of any consequence is our child's self-esteem – how they view themselves as individuals. Everything else flows from this.

As a society we have placed the individual at the centre of the universe. This becomes especially apparent in the secular world. If there is no spirit apart from the physical body and we simply cease to exist at death, then the universe truly does begin and end with me. It's not just that I become nothing when I die; once my eyes close everything becomes nothing.

With this worldview, I am all that exists. I AM.

If this is the case, that the individual is all that matters, and all that really is, then protecting the self is paramount. If the self is damaged, everything is threatened; the universe itself is wounded.

So we protect our self – our self-esteem. And when we encounter the tax man saying 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner,' we recoil. Admitting sin is a wound. More than admitting a particular sin, admitting that we are a sinner is a grievous wound – a mortal wound. Not something we can come back from.

So most westerners will recoil from the example of the tax man. The cost is simply too high – breaking down the value of the individual means dismantling everything – and we're not ready for that.

So how are we to understand this parable? We seem to be given a choice between declaring ourselves either pompous self-righteous cads, or completely depraved and degraded creatures. Has Jesus left us any other option?

Yes, I think so. The answer is found in God's response to sin. After the very first sin God came looking for his children – he sought them out. And even though Adam and Eve had to bear the consequences of their sin, God fashioned clothes for them and offered them protection.

Likewise in the next generation. After Cain killed Abel God sought out Cain, and though Cain also had to bear the consequence of his sin God offered him protection and covering as well.

Jesus himself is of course the best example of God seeking out human beings after we have sinned to offer protection and salvation.

What we consistently see is that sin does not get the last word – God does. This is critically important for our understanding of the tax man's situation.

We shrink away from naming ourselves as sinners because if the individual is everything and the individual is wrong, then everything is wrong. Our failure means that the universe fails, that everything is wasted, pointless, purposeless.

But if we put both sin and our own egos in their proper place we discover to our joy that our sin does not mean that everything is vanity and futility. God the rescuer seeks us out to work for good.

We shy away from words like sin and conviction and judgement. To us these are words of death. But to God judgement is not the final word on a failed life, but the first word of a new creation. Sin does not have to be the end, there is hope after sin.

Now, I don't want you to go home thinking that we need sin for God to act – that's not my point. We can count on the fact that sin will be present, we don't need to add to it. What we do need to do is repent of it.

When we've done wrong we need to acknowledge what we have done – only then can God heal and redeem us. We cannot be corrected if we admit no wrong. But admitting wrong is hard. We don't want to say that we are sinners. We'd rather say we are Dove bars – 99 and 44/100ths pure. Overwhelmingly good with just a few imperfections, just enough to give us character. Just like the Pharisee.

Unfortunately our greatest sin is the very thing that our culture promotes – that we as individuals are the centre of the universe. That we are the final arbiters of all that is right and good, that our opinions ought to dictate reality.

If we put more than a few seconds thought into this we'll see that we are usurping God's place – we are acting as though we are God. This of course was Satan's sin, and we keep repeating it.

The way out is to repeat the prayer of the tax collector. 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.' The purpose of this prayer is not to demean and debase ourselves – God doesn't take pleasure in his people grovelling. The purpose of this prayer is to recognize that God can do what we cannot – save us from ourselves. If we are everything, if we are the universe, there is no future but death.

But if God is everything and God is greater than our shortcomings then 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner,' is not a fatalistic resignation to failure but instead is a bold declaration of hope. It is a letting go of the illusion of self as the centre of reality and a grasping of God as the ultimate reality.

Once we recognize God as reality we can properly align ourselves to that reality. Instead of declaring ourselves righteous we accept that God is righteous – and then an amazing thing happens.

We were filled with disdain at the image of the Pharisee declaring himself righteous. It seemed arrogant and bold, and in the end was not true. The Pharisee was not vindicated, not because God withholds grace, but because he was not ready to receive it. When you are full of yourself, there simply isn't room for God.

But with the tax collector, notice that it was Jesus who declared him justified. We can say whatever we like about ourselves and others – that doesn't make it true. But when the creator tells you who you are you can rest secure.

By having the humility to be honest and face the truth about himself the tax collector opened himself up to God's truth that he was loved, accepted, and redeemed - and that truth is eternal.

At the end of the day,

It is by grace you have been saved through faith,
it is not from you;
it is the gift of God.

We accept this gift through what is known as the sinners prayer.

Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.
Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Amen.