

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Temple”

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Luke 18:9-14

This parable is so easy to understand. We get it. It resonates. We are on-board immediately. We are on Jesus' side with this one.

We might not like what Jesus says about having to choose between God or money, or what he says about turning the other cheek, or loving our enemies, or taking up our cross daily to follow Him. We certainly do not like that He keeps talking about a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. But this parable . . . we understand. It's intuitive. It makes sense.

A note of caution: the very fact that this parable seems easy should probably be a red flag. We'll get to that in a moment.

As we look at this parable, let's not be too quick to dismiss or belittle the efforts of this Pharisee to be faithful, especially when we compare him to our own efforts. After all, he was working very hard at his religion. He walked the walk. He valued God's Word and took great pains to observe all the Lord had commanded. For example, he tithes. Not two or four percent like so many of us. He gives the full load: ten percent! He puts his treasure where his heart is. To be faithful to God, he slashes his standard of living.

He also fasts. Most of us do not fast unless we must for a medical procedure. But this guy fasts twice a week. Twice a week! He studies. He participates. He prays through the day. He worships. He serves. His heart and skin are in the game. He's not dabbling at religion like so many today. He's not in the temple just when it's convenient. No, whether he feels like it or not you can count on him. He'll be there.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is a traitor. He has sold out to the Romans, the hated occupiers of the land. He fleeced his own people for the benefit of his own pocketbook. He was a willing participant in a cruel and corrupt system.

Now, the reason we think this parable is easy is because this Pharisee doesn't have a lick of humility in him and therefore goes home unjustified and that seems good and right to us. He prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Then he starts pointing to his works. "I fast. I tithe." His arrogance makes it easy for us to despise him.

When we feel contempt for this Pharisee, Jesus has us right where he wants us. We are judging and feeling morally superior to the Pharisee. When we are thankful that we are not like this Pharisee, we have become this Pharisee. By assuming I am the good guy, better than most, I am functioning as the Pharisee.

A few weeks ago, I overheard a lecture that Jacklyn was listening to. The professor, Dr. Mark McMinn, was talking about humility verses pride and how humility promotes physical and emotional health. The trouble is most of us are not humble.

Take any trait, like driving ability. If we viewed ourselves accurately, 68 % of us would see ourselves as average drivers. 16% of us would see we are below average. And 16 % of us would see ourselves as above average. That would be a normal bell-curve distribution. As it is, 93 % of us believe we are above average drivers; statistically impossible.

A million high school seniors were asked: "Compared with others, how well do you get along with your peers." 100% said they were average or higher. 60% said they were in the top 10 %. And 25% said they were in the top 1%. Again, statistically impossible, but that's how they rated themselves.

Ask college professors how good they are in the classroom as teachers. 2% will say they're below average. 10% will say they are average. 63 % will say they are above average and 25% will say they are truly exceptional.

Our man the Pharisee thanks God that he's not like other men. He's above average, if not truly exceptional. He knows he's not like the extortioners, the unjust, the adulterers, or this tax collector. He judges himself better than others. Jesus tells this parable because He knows we tend to think in similar ways. Most of us believe we are better than other people. And in these last few years, it's become abundantly clear.

During the worst of the pandemic, some looked with contempt on others for not wearing masks, putting themselves and others at risk. While some not wearing masks looked with contempt on those who did, because they were fearful, or because they were submitting to an oppressive government. Many on both sides felt rather self-righteous about it and thanked God they were not like those in the opposite camp.

Politically, some look down on those in the other party, believing they have been duped and have fallen for their lies. And many are grateful that they're smarter than that, better than that.

Some are fully supportive and accepting of LGBTQ lifestyles, and, having achieved this, feel more virtuous than the average American. Others are standing firm on their traditional convictions and, again, are feeling more virtuous than the average American. Isn't it nice that in America, everyone is better than the average American?

Paul writes, "In humility, consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). It's not that everyone else is superior or more talented, but that we see others as worthy of Christian love.

Don't you see how we have become pharisaical and holier-than-thou? Isaiah said, "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips" (6:5). We can say, "Woe is me! I can be sanctimonious and self-righteous, and I live among a sanctimonious and self-righteous people!"

Again, once we understand that we can so easily become like this Pharisee, then the parable is no longer so easy to digest, because Jesus is talking to us now. More than just talking, Jesus is accusing us, convicting us, especially when he says, "I tell you, this man, the humbled and contrite tax collector went home justified, and not the Pharisee." Then he adds, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14). 1 Peter 5 says something similar, "God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Well, what's the answer? How can we be saved from exalting ourselves with pharisaical pride? The only answer is Jesus.

If there was ever any individual who had the right to walk proudly because he was superior to the rest of humanity, it would be Jesus. If there was ever any individual who could look down on *everyone* else as His moral inferior, it would be Jesus. And yet, how does Jesus present Himself? He became as humble as a newborn infant, and as lowly as a terrible criminal dying on a cross. Philippians 2, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, and being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (v.5ff).

Jesus died on the cross, condemned in your place and mine. He died for our prideful, self-righteous judgment of others. He died to forgive us of exalting ourselves over others. He died to suffer the punishment we deserved for being sanctimonious. He died for us for when we are falsely proud of ourselves, our achievements, and our virtues in comparison to others.

We place our confidence and trust squarely on Jesus, on Jesus alone, and not ourselves. We place our confidence in His righteousness given to us like a cloak in Holy Baptism, never in our own righteousness which amounts to nothing.

Jesus is the answer. We come before Him because we know we have nothing to brag about, nothing to point to. We know it is not helpful to compare ourselves to others. It is only helpful to compare ourselves to the perfect holiness of our God. When we do so, we come before Him with empty hands, because He is the only One who can save us.

The old evangelism question is, "If you died today and stood before God and He asked you, 'Why should I let you into Heaven?' What would you say?" You would never want to say, "Because I'm better than average or truly exceptional and therefore deserve to be here." You would never want to say "I've been a good husband and neighbor, a good employee and citizen." You would sound just like the Pharisee. Instead, we point to Jesus alone as our Savior. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

You and I do not deserve to be in heaven, but "the blood of Jesus cleanses of all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7). Thanks be to God. Amen.