

A Pharisee, A Tax Collector and Me

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 18:9-14

This parable is almost certainly meant to be understood in the context of the daily sacrifice. These happened twice a day at dawn and 3PM. The people would come to the temple, a lamb would be sacrificed as a sin offering, the people would consecrate themselves to God, and then they would offer their prayers. So picture these two men in the temple at 3PM at the evening sacrifice.

When you read this parable and when you preach this parable you have to make sure to read it in the right way. Because everything in you wants you to read it as an underdog story. Everything about this story makes you want to read it as a story where the little guy triumphs over the big guy. You know the genre - The Boys in the Boat, Rocky, the Karate Kid, Disney's Mighty Ducks: A hockey team full of lovable losers. They are social and athletic failures. Everyone looks down on them, especially the best team in the league who beat them badly then rub their noses in it every time they play. But somehow these plucky little Ducks pick themselves up, and they come back and beat the arrogant champions, and they become the new champions. And we all stand up and cheer. That's an underdog story. We love stories like this, and we know their form so well that sometimes we read a story and say, Oh yeah! This is an underdog story and we put it in a box.

There is a temptation for us to read the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector and put it in that box. You want to think of the Pharisee as the nasty oppressor and the tax collector as the loveable underdog. You have this instinct to root for the humble tax collector, you want to loathe the arrogant Pharisee. But don't give in to these instincts! If you do that, you'll miss the point. If you give into that impulse to loathe the Pharisee and love the publican, you will in effect be saying: "Thank you Lord that I am not like that arrogant self-righteous Pharisee." If we read the parable as an underdog story it will lead us into the very sin the parable intends to destroy!

If we are going to hear this parable speak we've got to re-acquaint ourselves with these two men. We've got to see that if anything the Pharisee is the likable character in the story and the tax collector is the nasty one. Don't think of the tax collector as a loveable loser. He's not an underdog, he's a thief. Think of him as a con artist who steals from old people. Think of him as a drug dealer whose targets the local middle school as an emerging market. Better yet, think of him as one of those Nazi collaborators during World War II - he's sold out his home country and his neighbors for a buck. He's the French Nazi, rolling through Paris in his Benz with a German girl on his arm and a big cigar in his mouth. He's made a fortune on the back of his neighbor's suffering. He's not loveable; he makes you want to spit.

And don't think of the Pharisee as an arrogant snob. Sure his prayer sounds arrogant to modern ears, but back then it really wasn't so strange. That's how people prayed in those days. There are prayers recorded in the Talmud which invited religious men to thank God that they weren't like other people. In one prayer the pious thank God that they aren't like those whose lives revolved around making money: "For I am early to work on the words of the law and they are early to work on things of no moment; I run toward the life of the age to come, and they run toward the pit of destruction." There were many of these sorts of prayers, so in its context, the prayer itself isn't as arrogant as it might sound.

The Pharisee is really a pretty good guy. He is as religiously dedicated as they come. He fasts twice a week when the law only required fasting once a year. And his tithing was also extraordinary. Most people in those days thought that tithing was a practice which only applied to agricultural gains. Only cattle and crops needed to be tithed because when the Old Testament talked about tithing, it talked about cattle and crops. But this man goes beyond that; he gives a tenth of all he gets. All his income sources become the basis of the tithe.

He's a good man. If the tax collector comes to the temple in a two-thousand-dollar suit and driving his stretch limo, the Pharisee shows up at the temple in an 8-year-old minivan with a backseat full of toys for the homeless shelter. If you met these two in real life you would like the Pharisee. You would want to be his friend. You would introduce him to your daughter, you would want him to teach your kids catechism, you would elect him president of council. By every human standard, and even by the standard of God's law, the Pharisee is the good guy here.

So...This is not an underdog story. What it is, is a righteousness story. It's a story about what it takes to be accepted by God, what it takes to be declared righteous and justified before him. These two very different men show up in the temple at the 3PM sacrifice; the tax collector and the Pharisee, the choir boy and the crime Lord. They're looking for God's approval, looking for acceptance, looking to be declared justified. We think we know who is going to be righteous. We think we know who is the worthier of the two. But shockingly the crime boss is justified and the choir boy isn't. Why? How did this happen?

It happens because these two men are looking for righteousness in totally different ways. Basically there are two different ways of getting righteousness, two different ways for a thing to be declared righteous and worthy, and these two men exemplify these two different approaches. What are these two different ways for something to be declared worthy? I brought a visual aid to help explain them to you. Here is a work of art. Some of you who are literate in this area may recognize it; it is a painting by Peter Breughel called the *Numbering at Bethlehem*. I love this painting; I love it for all sorts of reasons: I love the little details of the village scene, I love it for its imagination, I love the way it depicts how on the night Jesus was born everyone was too busy to notice the blessed event. I find it a very moving painting. And it's not just me. This painting is recognized as a great work of art. Breughel is recognized as an old master. An art historian could tell you all the reasons it is significant and important. It is loved by people everywhere because it has proven its worth according to the canons of artistic excellence.

I have here another work of art. This is slightly less well known. It is a Jonker; a Katherine Jonker. It is a valentine that I got from my daughter when she was 4. This is me, this is a heart balloon, and this is her name. I love this work of art as well. I think it's great. In fact, all these years later, it's still hanging in my office and I get a warm feeling every time I look at it.

Which one of these do you think is the better work of art? Which one has better technique and composition? No contest right. If there was an art competition judged by the art faculty at Calvin, I know which one they would choose. But now what if I had to choose? If there was a fire in my house, and I had to pick one of these two pictures to rescue, which one do you think I would take? It wouldn't even be close. I would take the valentine every time.

To borrow Ian Pitt-Watson's way of putting it: There are two ways in which an object can be judged worthy. Some things are loved because they are worthy. Other things are worthy because they are loved. Some things, like this painting, are loved because they are worthy; they are intrinsically excellent. Some things, like Katherine's valentine, are worthy because they are loved.

The Pharisee is trying to be worthy like this painting (Breughel). He is comparing himself to the people around him and he's saying to God, "Lord my life is a work of art!!" He looks around him at the paintings of the lives of the rest of the people in the temple that day and he says, "Look Lord! mine is the best, especially when you compare it to that black blot of a life of that tax collector over there." The Pharisee is thinking of God as the divine art critic and he thinks he's earned a rave review.

The tax collector takes a totally different approach. He doesn't compare himself to others because he knows that his life is a disaster. He knows that if this is an art competition and God is the divine art critic judging his craftsmanship on its merits, he's going to get panned. His artwork stinks. And so he throws himself on God's love and mercy. He throws himself not on his own excellence, but on the excellence and mercy and character of God. He knows God won't like his painting, but maybe God will like him. And God does. God loves him. God calls him worthy, not on his merit, but by God's mercy He is worthy because he is loved.

This parable reminds us of a different way of doing righteousness, a new way of doing righteousness that will find its fullest explanation in the book of Romans which, you can argue, is a letter devoted to explaining God's new way of doing righteousness. In Romans 1:16-17 Paul summarizes the purpose of his letter like this: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last," Paul says, we aren't righteous because we are worthy; we are righteous because we have been loved by God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is something quite wonderful about this sort of acceptance, this love that makes something worthy. There is also something scandalous about it. If the Pharisee were here in church with us today, he might stand up and object to such an easy acceptance for a person like this no good tax collecting thief. Aren't you in effect encouraging deviant behavior with this sort of parable? What incentive do people have to live a decent life if all it takes to be accepted by God is a little breast beating and a cry for mercy. Doesn't obeying the law count for anything? Don't the commandments matter? What's to prevent people from living a corrupt life and showing up in church with their little 'I'm sorry, have mercy' every week!? It's an important question.

One of the answers to that question is, 'nothing.' God has spent all of history showing mercy to hardboiled sinners. The other part of the answer is that of course keeping the law matters, of course obedience matters. But it is not the basis of acceptance. Because he loves us, God accepts everyone who cries to him for help and forgiveness. Doesn't matter if you're a crime lord or a choir boy. But that doesn't mean he is equally pleased with all of us, it doesn't mean he's equally pleased with the things we do.

If both the Pharisee and the tax collector came to the temple that afternoon in the same spirit, both of them saying, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner" God would have accepted them both, but he would have been more pleased with the law abiding Pharisee. He does want us to be people who live by his law, for our sake as much as for his. Of course he's not happy with the tax collector's behavior, of course he's concerned about the work he's doing, of course he is going to challenge the tax collector to do better, but none of this is going to stop him from loving this man. And nothing is going to stop him from accepting this child who has come looking for mercy.

You see, I think what we need to realize is that ultimately the best efforts of our lives, our greatest achievements and triumphs and righteous acts, things which seem so wonderful and praiseworthy from a human perspective look quite different when measured against God. From our perspective we look at some lives and we say, "What a mess!" and we look at other lives and we say, "What a masterpiece!" But when measured against God, from his perspective, all our lives look more or less like a child's crude drawing (Katherine's Valentine). Our best holiness looks like the scribbles of a child when measured against his holiness. Our best intellectual work looks like childish scribbling when compared to the depth of his thoughts. Our biggest achievements look like childish scribbling when compared to his incomparable power. All our lives, from the best of them to the worst, need to be washed in Jesus' blood and clothed in his righteousness.

Which reminds us that this scene Jesus paints of these two men at the evening sacrifice looking for righteousness foreshadows another evening sacrifice, also made at 3 pm. Only in this case, the lamb sacrificed as a sin offering isn't offered up in the temple, but on a hill outside Jerusalem. On the cross Jesus becomes our sin offering. As Paul says in Romans 8, "What the law was powerless to do, God did, by sending his Son in the likeness of human flesh to be a sin offering, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us." Fully met. In us. There's enough grace there to clean the proudest Pharisee and the lowest tax collector. There's enough grace there to clean you and me.

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