"A Lesson in Humility"

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Luke 18:9-14

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Jesus is, once again, teaching in parables. He told it to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." He begins: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." This one's pretty straightforward – but there are some nuances and applications we'll get to later. But first, let's consider what kind of people these are.

The first man is a Pharisee. Basically, that means: *he's a really religious guy.* The Pharisees were one of several distinct groups within Judaism during the time of Jesus. These were learned men, who meticulously studied the Law of Moses – the first five books of the Bible – and observed the teachings as faithfully as possible, given their circumstances. The land of Israel was under Roman occupation, so what people could or couldn't do was determined to a large extent by what the Romans would allow. Most of the time, the Jewish people were allowed to practice their rituals and customs. The Pharisees did everything they could to observe the traditional Jewish laws that had been handed down to them for generations upon generations, both the written laws as well as the teachings of the Jewish elders that had been passed down orally. The Pharisees were, for the most part, good, faithful, well-meaning people. They weren't aristocratic or haughty; they didn't collaborate with the Romans for personal gain; they were respected and trusted by the common people. We Christians have often been taught to view the Pharisees negatively, because of their frequent conflicts with Jesus, but we need to give them more credit than that. The reality is that they were, for the most part, just trying to do what they believed God wanted them to do, based on their study of the scriptures, to the fullest extent of their ability.

The second man is a tax collector. The Roman Empire financed its massive military, its many public works projects, and its large bureaucracy by collecting taxes from the common people. In that respect it is very much like the tax collection system here in our country. But, of course, there were no Form 1040's, and no way for the people to send payment directly to the Roman equivalent of the Internal Revenue Service. So the Empire employed ordinary citizens to help them. These citizens, called *publicans*, were essentially private contractors. They would bid for the right to collect taxes in a certain region, and the winning bidder was awarded the contract. He would pay the government up front for the amount that was owed from that region, and then he would bear the responsibility for collecting the taxes from the common people. If he collected less than what he had bid, he would lose money; if he collected more than what he had bid, he would make money. This was a job well-suited for ambitious people. The harder they worked, the more money they were able to squeeze out of the common people, the richer they would become – and many of them became *very* rich. Two tax collectors are mentioned by name in the New Testament. One was Zacchaeus; he was "a chief tax collector" in the large city of Jericho, and he was "very rich." When Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's house, the people who were following Jesus grumble – they *know* what kind of man Zacchaeus is; they call him "a sinner" on account of his greed. Zacchaeus himself knows that he has done wrong; he promises Jesus that he will give half

of his possessions to the poor, and that he will pay back *four times* what he collected from anyone whom he defrauded. The other named tax collector in the New Testament is Matthew, also called Levi, one of Jesus's twelve apostles. He, too, seems to know that he was doing wrong; when Jesus sees him sitting at the tax-collection station and calls to him, Matthew does not have to be persuaded. He gets up and walks out, quitting his job and leaving the money behind! Both of these tax collectors – Zacchaeus and Matthew – knew that the way they made their living was inconsistent with the values and ethics of God.

In the parable that Jesus tells, there are these two unnamed men: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Both are Jewish. Both have come to the temple to pray. One of them, the Pharisee, is a righteous man. The other, the tax collector, is regarded as a sinner. One is a good guy; the other is not. If the parable were to stop right now, and Jesus were to ask the crowd "Which one of these is more righteous?", their answer would be, the Pharisee. He's done nothing wrong. He's faithfully following the Jewish Law.

But listen to how these two men pray. "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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'" This is a good man. He is not a thief, not a rogue, not an adulterer. He fasts twice a week. That's a lot! Jews were required to fast once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; there was no law saying they needed to fast more often than that. But many faithful Jews, including many Pharisees, fasted much more frequently, as a devotional activity, a way of drawing close to God. This man also gives a tenth of all his income to the temple. A full tithe – the percentage of income that Abraham gave to Melchizedek, an ancient high priest; the percentage that Jacob, the ancestor of the Jewish people, promised to God; the percentage that the Israelites were expected to contribute towards the temple and the priesthood; the percentage that the prophet Malachi demanded the people in his day contribute; the percentage of income that many people give to the church even now, because they believe it is the *right* thing to do. So this man is a paragon of virtue and a model of faith. He's offering thanks to God for all his virtues and his generosity. Almost everything he is doing is *good*, and worthy of praise. There's just one problem … which we'll consider in a minute.

So if that's how the Pharisee prayed, how did the tax collector pray? Like this: "the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" Like the two named tax collectors in the Bible – Zacchaeus and Matthew – this man knows that what he is doing is wrong. He has taken an honest assessment of his life, and he has come to one inescapable conclusion: *he's a sinner*. He has been living his life in ways contrary to God's will. He has come to the temple to repent, to change his life, and to beg God for mercy and grace.

Two men. A righteous Pharisee, giving thanks to God for his many virtues. An unrighteous tax collector, asking forgiveness from God for his many sins. Jesus says to anybody who is listening: "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." *Justified* is a fancy term that means *righteous in the sight of God*. Someone whom God justifies is someone whom God sees as righteous – no matter what sins they have ever committed. Their slate of sins is wiped clean.

It's easy to understand why Jesus commends the tax collector. He is sincere in his remorse and regret. He knows that what he has been doing is wrong. He is making an earnest attempt to change his life. He is coming to God in deep humility and penitence. Imagine if *more* people could be like that – realizing *on their own* that something they are doing is wrong, and asking God for mercy and grace?

But what was wrong with the Pharisee's prayer? It's a prayer of thanksgiving. There's nothing wrong with that. It's a prayer that identifies the Pharisee's many virtues and expressions of faith. There's nothing wrong with being virtuous and faithful. So what's wrong with this prayer? Well, Jesus

names it: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." This man was *exalting* himself. He was comparing himself to thieves – and thinking he's *better* than they are. Comparing himself to rogues – and thinking he's *better*. Comparing himself to adulterers – and thinking he's *better*. Comparing himself to that tax collector, that sinner, that scum of the earth – and thinking he's *better*. The tax collector's prayer had been based in *humility*. The Pharisee's prayer is based in *haughtiness*. *Arrogance*. A sinful form of *pride*. He was conceited, pompous, egotistical, and – perhaps most of all – he was *failing to see his own sinfulness*. He saw his many virtues – and they were *indeed* virtues! – but he did the wrong thing with them. Instead of taking an honest look at his life to see what *else* he needed to do to be good and faithful – what area or areas of his life were still out of line with God's will, what still needed to *change*, how he needed to *grow* – he put himself on a pedestal above everybody else. He was thinking too highly of himself. He was failing to realize that – for all his many virtues – he was still a sinner. Still needing to repent. Still in need of God's mercy and grace. The truth is that he was *just like that tax collector* that he was looking down upon with contempt. *Both* of them were sinful. *Both* of them needed to become more faithful to God. *Both* of them needed to grow. *Both* of them needed to change. But only *one* of them recognized that truth, and *acted* upon it.

So. Where do *you* find yourself in this parable? Are you more like the tax collector? Or are you more like the Pharisee? I have to be honest with you. When I look at my *own* life, the way *I* live out my faith, I am far more like that Pharisee than I want to admit. I have many of the same virtues. I have similar ways that I express my faith. And sometimes – yes, sometimes, probably far more frequently than I realize – I do the same kind of thing that Pharisee did. I look at other people … and I think I'm *better* than they are. That I've got better *values*. Better *morals*. That my behavior is more *ethical*. That I'm better than that man who broke into my grandparents' house and stole some of my grandmother's jewelry. That I'm better than that man who mugged friends of mine in Washington, DC. That I'm better than that seminary classmate of mine who embezzled money from an elderly woman who had hired him to help her. Those things that those three people did were wrong; I'm not saying that they weren't. But the truth of the matter is that *sometimes I also do things that are wrong*. I need to be able and willing to acknowledge that truth. Admit my faults, to myself and to God. Confess my sins. And – this may be the hardest part of all – *to beg for forgiveness*. Like that tax collector did. To come to the temple, the church, and get down on my knees, confessing my sin, humbly asking God for mercy and grace. This is what I need to do. Over and over again. This is what we *all* need to do. Because none of us – *not one single one of us* – is living completely righteously. There's not one among us who doesn't need to *change something* about our life. Not one among us who has attained *perfection*.

And … if that weren't enough! … I think there's one more dimension here. One of these men was very *religious*. The other one, most likely, *wasn't*. I mean, seriously, do you think that tax collector would truly be welcome in the synagogue for worship? So consider this from another perspective. In what ways do we church-going Christians look down on people of other faiths, or people of no faith at all? In what ways do we think we are *better* than they are? How often do we *judge* them? I tell you, the Christian Church in America has a serious problem today; there are a lot of people out there who think Christians are judgmental and hypocritical. *And they're right!* Too often, we are just that. Standing up on our high horse, claiming to be holier-than-thou, telling other people how they should be living their lives. *We need to stop that*. To borrow a phrase from Jesus, we need to stop looking at the speck in their eye, and see the log in our own. We need to stop looking at people outside the church and calling them "sinful." The sins we need to address are *our own*. We need to come before God, like that tax collector, get down on our knees, and humbly pray for mercy and grace. "God, be merciful to *us*, we sinners."

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