

“Balance”

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Luke 18:9-14 NIV

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The gospel of Luke is fascinating when you start to place all of Jesus' parables together. In his teachings, it seems as if Jesus is poised to bring division. As pastors, it's customary for us to get up behind the pulpit and preach about the peace that Jesus brings, but to be honest, in Jesus' time, he did not bring peace. Time and time again, Jesus “poked the bear,” and it was effective.

Today's lesson shows a parable very similar to the parable we had last week. The characters in this parable are unlike the stereotypes known by the people in that time. While it was customary to go to the temple to pray usually twice a day around 9:00 AM and again at 3:00 PM for the daily sacrifices, and the mannerisms of the individuals in the parable are acceptable by social norms, what is said in the prayers is completely shocking.

The pharisee who moves in, with the crowd, through the temple, being careful not to touch anyone who may be unclean, therefore making himself unclean, moves into position to pray. He stood by himself and prayed, “God, I thank you. I am not like other people.” This is translated inaccurately in the new international version of our Bible. **Pros Heauton Prosēucheto** is the Greek term that the English translates as, “stood by himself and prayed.” What it translates to literally is, “**toward himself was praying.**”

Now Jesus was notorious for such ambiguous language. This is what upset his critics so badly. Because this could be taken two ways, one, he prayed to himself quietly and respectfully so that no one could hear; two, he prayed to himself in a way that other people were forced to listen to his hypocritical bragging. I submit this morning that it was the 2nd meaning of this term that Jesus was referring to.

When Jesus teaches about the pharisee to his disciples, he says this in Matthew 23:5-7, ⁵“**Everything**

they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others." Then later in the same chapter, in verses: 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, and 29, he starts with, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"

So it is well established that Jesus sees the Pharisees and the teachers of the law as hypocrites. After all, Jesus starts the parable by telling it to some [v.9] "who were confident of their own righteousness and look down on everyone else."

The tax collector, on the other hand, was reviled by the Jews of Jesus' day because of perceived greed and collaboration with the Roman occupiers. The tax collector in this parable, "stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast, and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" although **we** look at this confession by the tax collector and say good for him for confessing his sins to God, the people of Jesus day looked upon tax collectors as outcasts, unclean, unworthy of forgiveness. Not by God, and certainly not by the nation of Israel.

Tax collectors amassed personal wealth by demanding tax payments in excess of what Rome levied and then keeping the difference, a process known as tax farming. Tax farming was originally a Roman practice whereby the Roman State reassigned the burden of tax collection to private individuals or groups. Essentially, these individuals or groups paid taxes for a certain area and for a certain period. They then attempted to cover their expenses by collecting money or saleable goods from those in that area. [Think of our modern-day collection agencies who buy debt from banks and corporations for pennies on the dollar and then track down the debtor to collect the original debt with interest.]

People did not love tax collectors. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sympathizes with the tax collector Zacchaeus, causing outrage from the crowds that Jesus would rather be the guest of a sinner than a more respectable or "righteous" person. The disciple Matthew was a tax collector. It is a complicated occupation and morally questionable at best. So, one can see why the tax collector never looks up in the temple.

So, this begs the question, why would Jesus tell this parable? By definition, a righteous person is seen as good in the eyes of God. And, of course, anyone who is evil enough to work with the occupying force from Rome deserves to be an outcast and cannot be righteous, therefore can never be seen as good in the eyes of God. So why tell this parable?

Jesus says that the tax collector was justified before God and not the Pharisee. even though in his everyday life he practiced the best spiritual practices and followed the letter of the law to the nth degree, when he came to the temple and raised his hands and looked up to heaven, he did not pray to God; he prayed to himself. like a child dancing in front of their parent saying look at me, look at what a good child I am; I have cleaned my room, I have washed behind my ears, I have eaten all my broccoli, and I have kept my shoes clean. the pharisee was so consumed by his "righteousness" that the only thanks he could give to God were that he was not like other people, those robbers, evildoers, and adulterers.

Yet, the tax collector knew his faults. He knew he was a Sinner. And he came before God in the temple, and he prayed for forgiveness, the only place where he could find it.

This raises the question, "how is one reconciled with God?" is it by following the law or being the best version of yourself? Is it doing right at all costs, based on what your religion tells you? Or is it by humbling yourself before God and asking forgiveness? How does one reconcile with God?

Jesus says in Mathew 5:19-20, "...whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

In our parable today, there are a few takeaways: one, being righteous for righteousness' sake is hypocritical. Two, being humble before God is justifiable no matter what you have done in your life; everyone is redeemable in the eyes of God, even a tax collector. And Three, if we take all of Jesus' teachings of "love thy neighbor, pray for your enemy" and couple that with the teachings and examples of prayer, and then we act like the tax collector as we face God, not looking up toward heaven because we know that we are not worthy. If we do all this, and beg for forgiveness because we are sinners. Then,

maybe, we find that **balance** where being a “good” Christian and being a “child of God” intersect. That **balance** of spiritual practice and doing good in the world. That **balance** of personal righteousness and public mission.

Just as the words of Jesus can have ambiguous meanings, the life of a Christian can also be ambiguous. Some Christians show up on Sunday mornings, at midweek prayer services, volunteer at homeless shelters, read their bibles daily and can hold their own in a theological discussion. But when they bow their heads to pray, they thank God that they are not like the homeless man that they feed that week; they thank God that they are not the community gossip; they thank God that **they** are not unrighteous.

Righteousness can easily become Pride, and we do not even know it. The great preacher Charles H. Spurgeon described pride as “an all-pervading sin.” He said, “Pride is so natural to fallen man that it springs up in his heart like weeds in a well-watered garden ... its every touch is evil. You may hunt down this fox, and think you have destroyed it, and lo! Your very exultation is pride. None have more pride than those who dream that they have none. Pride is a sin with a thousand lives; it seems impossible to kill it.”

When we come before God, we must be like that tax collector. We must be like repentant modern-day debt collectors. We must be like the alcoholic or the drug addict who has hit rock bottom and know that we are only justified in the eyes of God when we give God the glory for what we have, even though we are still sinners. The balance is to know that we are not righteous because we are Christians; we are righteous because of God.

Today I want you to think about the parable of the tax man and the pharisee. I want you to think about when you've looked at someone from across the restaurant, at the store, or in the parking lot who seems “down on their luck.” Be honest with yourself, was the first thing you thought, “I wonder what he did, or she did in her life, what decision was made that set them on that path?” Did you wonder what was their sin?

Now our rational brains know that is not how life works, sometimes, markets turn, and people lose their jobs. But our subconscious minds react out of irrational fear. “There but for the grace of God go I?” We are all capable of the sin of judgment. Even the righteous Pharisees.

So, as you contemplate this teaching of Jesus and you thank God for the many blessings that you have, also acknowledge that as righteous as you are in your life and in your walk with God, you're still a Sinner. And as you confess to God that you are a Sinner be assured that as you find that balance in your life somewhere between the pharisee and the tax collector that we will be justified before God and God will forgive. Let us pray,

Almighty and forgiving God, we thank you that we can come together in a House of worship. We thank you that we have the privilege of worshipping with those who have the same interests in righteousness as we have, and we're also thankful that we're able to sit in a room among sinners and be accepted by each other and by you. Heavenly Father as we move into this world that pulls us so far from you, help us keep a balance in our lives, help us to walk in your ways, but to also acknowledge that it is only by you and by your will that we we're able to function in this world. Father, we love to love you we pray that your Holy Spirit will surround us and protect us in the week to come until we can meet again. In the name of our savior Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.