

Where Love and Charity are Found

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Proper 30C, 2025

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Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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.' But 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!' 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."

Last week, we heard the parable of the widow and the judge as an instruction about the energy and persistence we ought to bring to our life of prayer. Today's parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector is the continuation of this lesson from Jesus about prayer. This parable is directed specifically at those who believe themselves to be more righteous than others. A group of people whose membership, by the end of our consideration of the parable, may surprise us.

This parable is something of a moral and spiritual trap laid for us by Jesus and Luke. But a good place to encounter a trap, because parables are meant to make us think, reflect, and learn. The characters in parables won't be hurt by our reactions to them. They are characters

Jesus has made up to teach with. But they can help us learn how to respond when we find ourselves in similar situations with real people.

We are told that there are two men, going to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Other than that they are men and something about the work they do, we have been told nothing about these two. In spite of this, we almost certainly have begun to make assumptions about them. Perhaps we think of Pharisees as especially holy people because of their adherence to the law and tax collectors as sinners because they collaborate with Roman occupiers. Perhaps we think of Pharisees as villains because they so often challenge Jesus in the Bible and we think tax collectors aren't so bad, even if the CRA telephone system badly needs an upgrade.

We are told at the end of the parable that the tax collector went home justified and the Pharisee did not, but our assumptions about these men begin long before we hear that part of the story. We come to this story with stereotypes and biases intact, ready to project. We should hold this in mind carefully as we consider the rest of the parable.

This parable asks us to consider very carefully what we are told. The Pharisee's gratitude and prayer of thanksgiving is genuine. We are not told that he is a liar or a hypocrite. He is genuinely grateful for the blessings in his life and wants to give thanks to God for them. Thanksgiving is a good and holy practice, one that many of us would benefit from doing more often.

But the Pharisee measures his blessings by comparing them to those of others. Or, rather, their lack. He compares himself to thieves and adulterers. It is easy to imagine one's self as exceptional if the bar to jump is lying on the ground. St Cyril of Alexandria remarks that fast-

ing and tithing are good and holy practices, but not if they are a pretext to sin.¹ When we use these to feel superior and look down upon others who do not share our practice, then they quickly become the offerings that God rejects.²

Then we have the tax collector to consider. This man looks down, afraid of even lifting his head in God's presence. Perhaps he remembers God's denial of Moses' request to see the divine glory (Exodus 33:18-20). Denied because the sight would kill a mortal, even one so holy and close to God as Moses. How much more danger might this sinner be in, standing in God's temple? He seems to be in the presence of God with genuine fear and trembling.

Our English translation³ says that the tax collector prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" The Greek does not say "a sinner", it says "the sinner". I think the choice by the translators is sensible. "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" makes for very awkward English. But the Greek provides an important emphasis. The tax collector is focused on his own sin, his own repentance. In this conversation between he and God, it is only and entirely his own sin which concerns him. This is important because, as we see in many stories in the Bible, there is a sense of corporate sin and responsibility in his culture. That he would isolate himself in this prayer is a statement about how he is approaching this time with God and the weight he feels from it. He is not the judge of anyone and is accounting only for himself in this prayer before God.

Our own experiences and the stereotypes we hold will colour how we see the men in this story. If our faith formation has emphasized

sin, shame, and unworthiness, we may think the Pharisee is wrong to simply begin by giving thanks, without first abasing himself before God, acknowledging his many sins, and only then giving thanks for his blessings. Perhaps we are so attuned to issues of social justice and liberation that we think that the tax collector, colluding with the Romans and profiting off of the misery of his own people, has no business being in a place as holy as the temple, whether to atone for sin or not. Jesus' explanation, with Luke's help as the narrator, lays out for us how we are meant to understand these men. The tax collector goes home justified while the Pharisee does not; those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The trap laid in this parable is that, when we have heard it, we think to ourselves. "Oh yes, I should much rather be like the pious tax collector than that awful, self-righteous Pharisee." At which point, my friends in Christ, we have become the Pharisee. Looking at another, taking on God's role as judge,⁴ concerning ourselves with their righteousness rather than our own, and making this presumption part of our life of faith and prayer is a dangerous temptation.

In the Bible and in the tradition of our Church, we are called to be reflective, honest, and vulnerable in our prayer with God. We will admit when we have sinned, we will make amends, we will convert our lives so that we do not sin that way again, and we will work toward reconciliation. We will find that trusted friends and helpers are important in this work. People who can tell us, in love, when we are missing the mark and need to reconsider our words and actions. This might be a spouse, family members,

¹St Cyril of Alexandria, *Sermon 120*, 558.

²Amos 5:22

³New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴James 4:12

close friends, a spiritual director, a confessor, or some combination of those people.

Likewise, when it comes to how we relate to others, we are called to welcome the stranger, care for them, and love them as God has welcomed, cared for, and loved us. St Benedict instructs monastic communities to welcome every stranger as though they were Christ;⁵ the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of entertaining angels unaware;⁶ and Jesus himself reminds us that the way we treat the least among us is the way we treat him.⁷ In none of these instructions are we called to first judge the righteousness and deserving of those we meet, in fact quite the opposite.⁸ We are called only to respond as the people of love and charity that we are called to be, remembering that judgement is God's work, not ours.

Thanks be to our God whose mercy endures forever, that the sinner may approach in prayer, heavy with concern, and return home lightened and renewed by grace. Amen.

⁵Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 53.

⁶Hebrews 13:2

⁷Matthew 25:40-45

⁸Matthew 7:1-5