

## **“GRACE IS WIDER THAN JUDGEMENT”**

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***Luke 18:9-14***

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Stories invite us to identify with a character and parables are no different. When we hear a parable, our inclination is to identify with someone, some character, in the parable. It might be the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son, but we tend to identify with someone.

This morning we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and our identification seems a foregone conclusion. William Muehl, Professor Emeritus at Yale Divinity School, points out that the tax collector looks good because he is in a two-person lineup and the other person is one of our stock villains. With the rare exception, Pharisees have fared poorly in the gospel account. But maybe this morning we might think a bit deeper about who we would identify with in the parable.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. If we were Jews from the time of Jesus, we would notice immediately that something was amiss in Jesus' telling of this parable. The image of a Pharisee going to the temple to pray was about as common a sight as you might expect to see. But the tax collector, **well that's something altogether different.** Tax collecting was one of the occupations that were forbidden for Jews. Tax collectors were **ritually impure** and they were considered extremely dishonest. They worked for the hated Romans, the occupiers of Palestine. In fact a devout Jew could not receive payment from the treasury of a tax collector nor could the poor receive donations from it for all the tax collector's money was considered to have been gained by theft.

Tax collectors could not serve as judges in the Palestine of Jesus' day and they couldn't even serve as a witness. They were considered outcasts, outsiders, unclean, traitors to their own people, and even members of their families were not to be trusted as witnesses.

So for Jesus to say that a tax collector showed up at the temple to pray would have caused waves among those who were listening. It just wasn't done, **he wouldn't have been welcome.** But the Pharisee would have been very welcome. He was your typical upstanding citizen. We have come to hear the word Pharisee in a very negative manner, but in the time of Jesus, Pharisees were widely respected and admired. Unlike the Sadducees, Pharisees had no political power, they were people who took the Jewish tradition and their scriptures, the Torah, very seriously, and tried to interpret the law in ways that touched daily life. In fact, after the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was the Pharisaic tradition of teaching and living which enabled the survival of the people in the absence of the temple. This particular Pharisee in the parable Jesus tells is even more devout than usual. We learn from his prayer that he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of his income to the temple. He goes above and beyond what is necessary.

**The problem is that he knows it.**

His prayer is difficult to listen to. *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 my income.* The prayer really isn't a prayer as much as it is a highlight package all about him. It's almost as if the Pharisee wants to tell anyone around him about how good he is and God just happens to be around to do the listening.

**God doesn't have to do anything for this Pharisee, except to agree with him!**

The problem isn't with his sense of righteousness, but rather his sense of **self-righteousness**. It's not enough for the Pharisee that he is a faithful follower of the law that the way he lives his life conforms to, and surpasses, the expectations of the law. Rather than leaving it at that, the Pharisee looks around and finds people to compare himself to, and he finds them lacking. I thank you God that I am not like other people, he prays.

**The words Jesus uses to frame this parable are perhaps the most important ones.**

Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable to **some** who trusted **in themselves** that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. Do we know people like this? Do we know people who seem to always be looking around for someone who doesn't meet their standard, just so that they can seem more righteous in comparison? I mean, we all do this to a certain extent, don't we? If we're honest, we have to admit that there's a certain satisfaction in comparing ourselves to those who don't measure up. But Jesus is clear, **all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.**

So maybe the tax collector **is** the obvious choice to identify with after all. Standing far off, perhaps knowing that he wasn't welcome at the temple, the tax collector couldn't even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and prayed, *God be merciful to me, a sinner!*

For that, Jesus says, this man went to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. For all his faults, this man was a humble man. He knew he was a sinner. We are drawn to his simple prayer, to how different his prayer is from the prayer of the Pharisee. There's no boasting, there's no comparing, there's only a desperate need for God's mercy. **And so it's easy for us to want to identify with him.**

But in doing so, we have to be very careful of not becoming the very thing we're trying to avoid. We want to identify with the tax collector **because he isn't the Pharisee.** He isn't self-righteous. He isn't a hypocrite. He isn't full of himself. **And we are eager to point that out.** But the moment we do, **aren't we doing exactly what Jesus warned about at the beginning of the parable?** Jesus told this parable **to some** who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. **You see, righteousness, or self-righteousness, is not limited only to the proud or the powerful. Self-righteousness is a temptation which is common to all of us.**

There is a life lesson of which we should all take note. Theologian Peter Woods argues that it's a hard lesson to learn, that when we fall and fail in life, it's not usually from our weaknesses, **but from our strengths.** We don't guard our strengths as we would guard our weaknesses. It's easy for the Pharisee to look down on the tax collector and conclude that he is better than a traitor, a thief and an outcast. But it is equally as easy for those in the situation of the tax collector, to look upon the Pharisee and conclude that the Pharisee is a hypocrite and a pompous fool. One side accuses the other of **ignorance** and the other side responds with charges of **arrogance.** The rich call the poor lazy and the poor charge the rich with corruption. The religiously devout look with scorn upon those whose faith is spotty while the spotty accuse the devout of false piety and pride.

Jesus told this parable **to some**, who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. **Jesus never says who those some are.** It's not necessarily only the Pharisees. There are some who are more akin to tax collectors than Pharisees, **but whose contempt of others is just as strong, just as vicious.**

We can tell ourselves that we are righteous because like the Pharisee, we keep the law, we are upstanding citizens, we are the ones who support the church with our offering, who volunteer our time and talents. Or we can tell ourselves that we are righteous because we are humble, because even though no one would ever mistake us for a leader, whether in our city or in our church, because even though we can't support the church with much money or time, we can't afford to give 10 percent, **but at least when we give, it hurts**, not like those who can give a lot and still have buckets of money left over. **The point is that those who trust in their own righteousness will always find a reason to treat others with contempt.**

Trust in our own righteousness is a temptation common to all people. The prayer of the Pharisee, *Lord I thank you that I am not like this tax collector*, is easily reversed into, Lord I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee. **What we need to do is to move beyond righteousness.** What is necessary is true humility, not a conditional one or a comparative one. We need to move beyond righteousness and into seeing how all people, all of us, are in need of justification by God. **We need to acknowledge that no one is above another, but that all are in need of God's grace and mercy.**

We think that the more righteous we are, the more we will receive God's mercy and grace. Yet scripture tells us that there is no one who is righteous, not even one. All have turned aside; all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus. **Our** righteousness won't save us, **only God's righteousness in Jesus will.** We need to move beyond righteousness and into generosity. Charles Cousar writes that **prayer is the occasion for honesty about oneself and generosity about others.**

Is that what our prayers are like?

Do we pray generously about others or do we pray with contempt about those who pester us, those who annoy us, those who we don't like, don't trust, don't believe? The point of the parable is to stop living with contempt and to start living with real humility and generosity, **to live as a people whose grace is wider than judgement.**

One of the hardest things to overcome as people of faith living in the culture we do, is the concept of **meritocracy**. Our culture values merit, accomplishment, hard work, achievement. That's why we tell our children to work hard, to do well in school, so that they can get good grades that lead to good jobs, so that they can do well in their careers, so that they can get ahead. That's why we praise people who have excelled, as athletes, artists, professionals, whatever their field, even religion. The concept of meritocracy says that you get what you work for, you get what you deserve. Those who succeed get the rewards. But grace isn't about merit, grace is getting **what we don't deserve**, grace is receiving from God **only what God can give**, something that none of us is deserving of, but comes freely as God's gift.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't work hard, that we shouldn't strive to be the absolute best we can be, to do the absolute best with the gifts God has given us, that we shouldn't seek to be successful, imaginative, innovative, compelling. But it does mean that as a people of God's grace our success, our achievements, our merit, should never be used to judge others for their seeming lack of merit. If we want to go "Wide with the World" we need to be "deeply immersed" in the grace of God. **We can't go wide with the world if we won't leave our judgement behind.**

We can't go wide with the world if we look down on those who don't meet the criteria of worldly success or look with suspicion and scorn on those who we're convinced achieved what they did through less than noble means.

The election we've just been through has got to be the most disappointing one I've ever lived through as a Canadian. I'm not talking about the results, although I'm sure my friends in Calgary have lots to say about that, I'm talking about the campaign. I've never been part of an election where less was said about the actual policies of a party and so much was said about how one's opponents were unfit, hypocrites, not as advertised or social dinosaurs. I voted, but I've never been more tempted to not participate. But I suspect that it's just part of where our society has been going for some time now. The results of the election have left us more divided than ever before, more opposed to others, **not just to their policies, but to the people. The level of vitriol is unprecedented.**

You may have read about a horrible slur written on the campaign offices of Catherine McKenna, the Liberal Environment Minister in Ottawa Centre. On Thursday her staff arrived at her campaign office to find a misogynistic slur spray painted in red across a photo of McKenna's face. It's is one of the most ugly, vile words you can think of, one meant to demean, threaten and dehumanize another person. People can disagree with the government's policy on climate change, but this isn't about disagreeing with policy, this is about hating an individual. Sadly, there are lots of other examples.

And it's not that different within the church. We know that there are issues which the church struggles with, but people don't just disagree with others around theology, we find others disagreeable. We can't seem to hold to a deeper sense of grace and instead we insist that if someone disagrees with us, there's something deeply wrong with them. We've got to do better.

We've got to remember that Jesus told the parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. **We've got to remember that our grace needs to be wider than our judgement.**

Who do we identify with in the parable?

What if the best answer is that we identify with both because both are the children of God. Both are flawed. The Pharisee needs to work on his words but the tax collector needs to work on his actions. One has to learn to speak with more charity; the other has to learn to live with more courage. **But we identify with both because we have been both and because both are loved by God.**

The good news is that even in the aftermath of such a divisive election campaign, we have an opportunity to move beyond a sense of our own righteousness, our own self-righteousness, **and toward a grace that overcomes judgement.** But to really make our country and our society work, we need to embrace a sense of grace and generosity; **we need to pray for honesty about ourselves and generosity about others.** I can't imagine the God of Pentecost, the God whose Spirit gave voice to such diversity, but in the unity of one message of love, I can't imagine the God of Jesus Christ, in whom there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, wanting for us to keep building walls that separate us rather than the humble relationships which will bring us together.

Don't we want to be part of a society that brings people together than pulls them apart? But does the prospect of what it would take to bring about that sort of change overwhelm us? Maybe it needs to start on a smaller scale, maybe it can start with us.

Do we want to be part of a church that goes Deep with God and Wide with the World? If we do, then maybe this week the challenge for us will be to think about one person, one group of people, with whom we might disagree, but with whom we can't be disagreeable. Who is it that we have been quick to judge, to treat with contempt? Who is it that we have liked to compare ourselves to because we think we come out on top? **Could we let the judgement go and instead become a means of God's grace?** In a world that is already too polarized, divided into opposing camps, tribes, trusting in their own righteousness and treating others with contempt, can we pray with generosity for others and see them as those in need of God's grace, just like us? Could we work to break down old stereotypes and expectations and endeavor to treat others with generosity, dignity and compassion? Will we live as a people whose grace is wider than judgement and live with the understanding that all of us are loved by God, and are children of God? If the people who say we follow Jesus won't live this way, who will? So may it start with us!

And to God be the glory, now and forever, Amen.

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