

## **Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, October 23, 2022**

### **Text: Luke 18:9-14**

“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Our Gospel today deals with divisions between two people who have different political, religious, and economic backgrounds. We know this story right? I don't mind differences of opinion, but when it crosses the line to judgement or tearing another person down, I draw the line.

In our Gospel, one person knows they are a sinner and exhibits a broken heart over what they have done and begs for mercy. The other is justifying themselves with God through their piety and ability to fulfill God's laws. Be prepared to be surprised at which one is considered to be in a right relationship with God.

In the parable, we have two groups of people common in Jesus' time... Pharisees and tax collectors who go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee would be a temple insider, having full access to the temple and religious services, and the tax collector would only be allowed to go so far, and then be told to keep out.

Pharisees were members of a Jewish political movement that emphasized the importance of obedience to the laws of Moses... the torah.. the first five books of the Old Testament. Living in accordance with torah was a public way to demonstrate being in a right relationship with God. But sometimes, Pharisees could come across as arrogant and judgmental of others... pointing out the smallest of sins. Jesus had many debates with Pharisees over interpretation of scripture. Jesus always erred on the side of interpreting scripture through the lens of the two greatest commandments... Loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The Pharisees weren't all bad people, they just thought they could please God by their works. One scholar once said you would want to have a Pharisee for a neighbor, because they wouldn't covet or steal

from you. They tried to live by the 10 commandments found in Exodus and Leviticus.

Tax Collectors, on the other hand, were considered villains and slimy. They would bid on contracts with the Roman Empire to tax roads, bridges, markets, or docks. Tax collectors would line their own pockets with whatever they could collect over and above their contractual obligations. The gospels operate with an understanding that tax collectors were dishonest and greedy. They were willing to exploit their own neighbors while assisting the Roman occupiers. And yet, Jesus called Matthew, a Tax Collector to be one of his disciples. And he visited the home of the tax collector, Zaccheus, and shared a meal with him. Zaccheus changed his greedy ways after that meal with Jesus... much like communion can do for us today.

So, one would expect in the parable that the Pharisee will be the hero, and the tax collector the villain. But that is not the case, the Tax collector is the one who goes home justified... or put in a right relationship with God.

The reason is found in their prayers. The Pharisee is all puffed up by his religious piety. He exalted himself and his self-righteousness. He prayed, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' Can you hear the disdain in his voice over what he thinks of the tax collector?

The Tax Collector's prayer, on the other hand, is honest and vulnerable. He begs for mercy. He knows how bad he is. Luke writes, "<sup>3</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" The tax collector felt the shame and weight of his sins. He had a broken and contrite heart. It is there that God's grace broke through. He went away justified, or in a right relationship with God. It is no wonder we start almost every worship service in worship with confession and forgiveness. We come humble like the tax collector, beating our breasts, confessing we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

The parable encourages contrition and celebrates God's extravagant mercy. Pastor Matthew Skinner wrote on the working preacher

website, “It is rather outrageous that God shows mercy so easily to such a villain. The grace on display here is as absurdly generous.” God’s generous grace is for us too in our villainous states. If you have done something wrong, admit it, say I am sorry, and try to make amends.

Today in church we came with the ways we mess up and fall short of God’s glory. We carry burdens with us. But through word and sacrament, you can go home forgiven and justified in God’s sight.

Amen