

Luke 18:9-14

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13 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!’

14 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.”

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SIN

William Willimon, a bishop in the Methodist Church told of going to his church’s general conference. That’s the national meeting for Methodists sort of like our General Assembly.

Willimon said that after the conference ended it took him a week to overcome his aversion for fellow Methodists. He wrote,

“The self-righteousness was overwhelming. All day long for an entire week, people rushed to the microphone to proclaim to the rest of the delegates,

‘Maybe the rest of you can sit back and do nothing about the scourge of Malaria, but I am moved to speak and say that you ought to do something about it. Look at what I am doing.

Or, ‘I dissent from the majority vote because I am really in pain over the plight of those in poverty. Call me crazy, but I will stand with Jesus.’”

Now I’m sure the good bishop was exaggerating to make his point, but you get the idea. Thank God we’re not Methodists, right?

Oh wait, I watched the General Assembly online this year and guess what? You guessed it. Despite our Reformed theology we sounded a lot like the Methodists.

And though I don't know about the other denominations directly I bet you could find the same kind of attitude in all the other national gatherings as well.

Willimon concluded his story about the general conference by saying, "Perhaps my indignation at their indignation shows how far I am far from being immune to the sin of self-righteousness that I am condemning in them."

And yes in my smug condemnation of the church I am not demonstrating my superiority either. I am illustrating this very sin!

Self-righteousness is an equal opportunity sin! We see it in the church. We see it in politics. We see it everywhere we go.

Thank God I'm not like those other folks over there. But, this parable teaches us that the minute we say that we put ourselves in the same boat. Our prayers don't get beyond the top of our heads, and we remain in our sins. We don't go home justified.

In fact I think that's why our debates about various issues become so shrill and uncivil. We know deep down inside that we're not right with God or with ourselves.

A PARABLE FOR TODAY

I learned this week that Luther preached 13 times on this lesson, more than most other passages. Maybe even the greatest figure of the Reformation had trouble really convincing people that we are saved by grace and not by works.

And we're still having trouble with that today.

Once again let me give you my definition of a parable. It's an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. In other words it's a very human story that tells some truth about God's kingdom.

The main character in every parable is God. Whenever you read a parable you need to ask,

"What does this story teach me about the God?"

GOOD NEWS NOT GOOD ADVICE

A parable is not a morality play in which we use one person as an example of what it means to be good and another person as an example of what it means to be bad.

And yet we often interpret parables in this way.
When we do this we turn the good news into good advice!

For example in this particular parable we act like the Pharisee is the bad guy and the tax collector is the good guy. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

One Roman Catholic commentator wrote that if this parable were being told today, it would be called the parable of the “pimp and the Pope!” We Protestants might call it the parable of the pimp and the preacher.

But, you get the idea.

The Pharisee really was a good guy. He gave money to the poor. He knew the Bible. He followed the commandments. He loved his country.

And the tax collector really was a bad guy. He was a legman for the Roman IRS. He was a traitor to his faith and to his country. If anyone was going to hell it was the tax collector.

No wonder the Pharisee thanked God that he was not like the tax collector. If Willie Nelson had lived in Jesus’ day everyone in Israel would have sung, “Momas don’t let you sons grow up to be tax collectors!”

THE DISTURBING SURPRISE

But, in this parable it was the bad guy who goes home justified.

That’s the disturbing surprise of this parable that we often miss. Once again we see that in the parables of Jesus the world is turned upside down, and we are forced to look at ourselves in a new way.

This parable is about the right way to pray and worship. How should we approach God?

Is worship a way of confirming what I already believe and bolstering my own sense of self-worth and self-righteousness? Or is worship a time to humbly confess my shortcomings before God and ask for grace?

Most of us know the “right” answer. The message of the parable seems self-evident. But, we have a harder time accepting that message personally. Like Luther we may preach a multitude of sermons on this passage and still not take it to heart.

THE WRONG COMPARISON

So what is in our heart?

The Bible tells us that we are slaves to sin. The Bible tells us that before God our righteousness is like filthy rags. We are unclean. (Isaiah 64:6) We have all sinned and fall short of God's glory. (Romans 3:23)

You see the Pharisee made the wrong comparison in his prayer.

When we worship and pray we do not compare ourselves to the thieves, rogues, adulterers and traitors. We compare ourselves to the glory of God. We compare ourselves to the one who created the heavens and the earth.

And of course in comparison to God we all look mighty small and mighty sinful.

DEEP IN DEBT

I like to joke about the fact that when we Presbyterians say the Lord's Prayer and talk about sin we use a financial image. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

But, being "deep in debt" is a pretty good description of the human condition.

Remember that Tennessee Ernie Ford song? "Sixteen tons and what do I get? Another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter don't you call me cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store."

I've always liked that song because it expressed, in a whimsical way, how many people feel. We overwhelmed not only by debt but also by life.

The harder we work the farther behind we get. The more we pay, the more we owe. The more we try to do the right thing, the bigger mess we make.

There's something liberating about admitting that. There's something liberating about dropping to our knees and dropping all pretense. There's something liberating about saying,

"Lord, I owe more than I can afford to pay. Have mercy on me a sinner."

That's what the tax collector did, and he found forgiveness. That's what the Pharisee did not do, and he did not find forgiveness.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

There are two reasons that we do not experience the grace of God's forgiveness.

The first reason is that we think that we're so bad that God could not possibly forgive us.

Notice that the tax collector prayed standing far off, away from the rest of the congregation and not even looking up to heaven.

That was symbolic of how he felt. He felt a need for God and to be with God's people, but even in the temple salvation seemed far away.

If that's the case with us, we need to hear John 3:16 again. God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved.

And that means you! God asks those of us who are far away to come near.

If you're like the tax collector beating your breast in shame, hear the good news.

It's not too late. You can receive mercy. You're not stuck forever in your shameful way of living.

God can change you. And your sin can be forgiven.

The second reason we don't experience the grace of God's forgiveness is more common in the church. We think (subconsciously of course) that we're not all that bad. In fact we think that we're so good that with just a little help we can save ourselves.

The Pharisee seemed to be on the right track. He practiced tithing, fasting and prayer. Those are the very things that should cultivate a relationship with God. I recommend these practices to all of you.

But, these practices did not form his identity and bring him closer to God. Instead, the Scripture tells us that he was far away.

Notice that the Pharisee, like the tax collector stood apart from the people. He was standing by himself when he prayed.

But, the Pharisee didn't stand apart out of shame. He stood apart out of pride.

He saw himself as holier than the others and that separated him not only from God but also from the people of God.

SEEKING GOD, NOT INFORMING GOD

A seasoned theologian, Helmut Thielicke wrote “A Little Exercise for Young Theologians.” In that piece he cautions students that in their prayers they should not shift from the second person (talking to God) to the third person (talking about God).

I still remember one of the criticisms a professor leveled at one of my “practice prayers” in seminary. The seminary professor wrote by what I thought was a very insightful prayer, “It sounds like you’re trying to inform God!”

The truth hurt, and yet I needed to hear it.

We must avoid the temptation to inform God. Instead, we must learn to seek God and trust solely in His mercy for our salvation.

If we underestimate our need for salvation, we won’t ask for it. And like the Pharisee if we do not ask for God’s forgiveness, we will not receive it.

What Jesus is telling us through this parable is that human goodness isn’t enough. Works can’t save us.

If the world could have been saved by good advice from God, then the world’s problems would have been solved ten minutes after Moses got down to the bottom of the mountain with the commandments.

Everyone would have read the commandments and then said, “Oh yes. Now I see what to do.” But, it didn’t work that way.

There’s nothing wrong with the commandments, but we ignored them.

And ironically sometimes the people who try the hardest to keep the commandments are the very people who break them the most. We all know what Mark Twain was talking about when he talked about a man who was a “good man in the worst sense of the word!”

All of us be we relatively good bad or indifferent are sinners without hope save for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

GETTING NOTHING OUT OF WORSHIP

The most telling comment anyone ever makes to me is when they say, “I didn’t get a thing out of that worship service.”

What they mean is that the pastor didn't preach a sermon that was very helpful (surely not) or that the choir was off key or that some other element of the worship service was not right.

It happens! Worship leaders can do a poor job.

But, in the final analysis worship is not defined by the skill of the worship leaders. (Thank God!)

Worship begins in the heart of the worshipper. The important question is not, "What did we get out of the worship service?" The important question is, "What did I bring to the worship service?"

This parable suggests that we should bring an overwhelming desire for grace and forgiveness.

UNDERSTANDING AND BELIEVING IN GRACE

The theme of the New Testament is grace. And yet so many people have a hard time understanding and believing in grace. Perhaps it is because it seems too good to be true, that God would be merciful to us just because we ask for mercy.

But, that's the message.

Grace is the salvation we don't deserve but receive anyway. And from the very beginning people didn't trust good news to be good. They kept trying to turn the good news into good advice.

And so Jesus used example after example in an effort to get people to understand.

He said that grace is like a father who forgives and welcomes his good for nothing son back home.

He said that grace is like being paid a whole day's wages when you've only worked an hour.

He said that grace is like a sinful, hopeless man who beats his breast in anguish and asks for mercy. And God grants his request.

Have you ever been deep in debt? Have you ever been afraid of the mailman because you knew he was going to bring another bill that you couldn't pay?

And then one day things turned around. Maybe a family member gave you some money or maybe that new job opened up.

Do you recall how relieved you felt? Do you remember the sense of gratitude?

That's grace.

By the power of God's grace we receive forgiveness. And by the power of God's grace we are enabled to forgive others.

That's why we say each week, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

A DEADLY SIN

Pride is classified in the Roman Catholic Church as one of the seven deadly sins. Though we do not generally classify sins in the Protestant Church, in this case our Catholic brothers and sisters may have a point. If ever there was a deadly sin, pride is it.

It is deadly because it is a hidden sin. It finds its way into our lives when we least expect it. We do not know that it is controlling our actions.

And it is deadly because it separates us from God. We do not ask for mercy because we do not know that we need it.

May God help us see ourselves as we really are. And may we learn to pray, "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

Amen.