

The Prayers of Two Lonely People
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Luke 18:9-14
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Jesus begins his story: "Two men stand on opposing ends of a great big temple."

On the near end, stands a Pharisee. On the other, a tax collector. Who are these men?

Let's start with the Pharisee.

Christian history has distorted that term, Pharisee. Too often, we've come to associate Pharisees, along with Sadducees and Scribes, as persons wholly-combative toward the ministry of Jesus. We've wrongly called them reactionaries and exclusionists.

Historically, Pharisees were people of piety – they devoted themselves to fulfilling Torah. They lived their lives with discipline and purpose. They loved the people of their community. And they loved God. I think a fair comparison of their devotion would be found in the European piety movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Moravians, Methodists, Quakers, and even Baptists who devoted every aspect of living to God.

When Jesus describes a Pharisee, his audience pictures a man who is righteous and who is devoted and who is good. And they picture a man who loves God.

On the far end, stands a tax collector.

Don't think of the tax collector as a modern-day IRS agent. Today, our government pays its tax agents a salary to collect pre-determined amounts from every citizen. We may not like to pay taxes, and we may not be particularly fond of the persons sent to collect those taxes, but by and large, we don't deny that our tax collectors are transparent. They collect standard fees and return them to the government.

This was not the case in ancient times. Tax collectors were often foreign agents contracted to collect the taxes of local citizens. And they were not required to be transparent. Most became extremely wealthy because they collected more taxes than were due: some for Caesar and some for me. It was bad enough to be an agent of Rome in occupied territory. It was even worse to be a tax collector.

When Jesus describes this tax collector, his audience looks upon said person with the same disdain as a moonshiner would look upon a revenueur. To those in Jesus' audience, the tax collector is the antithesis of the Pharisee. He is irreverent and unrighteous, and in no way, a lover of God.

Jesus' audience, and us as well, expect a straightforward story to unfold: The Pharisee, that righteous man of God, will do a righteous thing, and the tax collector, that not-so-righteous man, will do a not-so-righteous thing. And of course, we get the opposite of what we expect.

Each man offers a prayer.

Let's start with the Pharisee:

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.

What a lonely prayer! In his attempt to remain righteous and whole and pure, the Pharisee seems to remove himself from community. He is isolated by high standards and impossible expectations.

Amy Jill Levine writes that Jesus' audience would find this testimony shocking. They would have believed the Pharisees to be people who encouraged inclusion – here they find a man weary of the company he keeps. And in the Temple, a place that's supposed to be for all people.

On the other end of the Temple, the tax collector offers a different, but no less lonely style of prayer. He is distraught, so distraught he beats his chest and hangs his head. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" he says.

Once again, the audience is shocked. We'd expect a lot of things from the tax collector, but humility and honesty are not two of them. But they are there. The tax collector, though most likely wealthy, is certainly not rich in spirit, nor rich in community. His actions have removed him from authentic community. And isolated from loving and fulfilling relationships, he cries out for God's mercy. And Jesus praises this vulnerability.

The author of Luke closes our lection with a word about justification. Elizabeth Johnson writes that the tax collector is "made just by God's mercy while the Pharisee (who considers himself just) is not considered just by God."

And then we get that famous line, "Those who exalt themselves will be made humble, and those who are humble will be exalted."

And our little modern minds say, "What a nice bow on it all! Moral of the story: The Pharisee is a nasty horrible person, and the tax collector is a pretty good guy – the tax collector is our moral exemplar."

But then the words begin to seep in, and they start making us think. And a straight-forward reading of the text doesn't help us very much.

For starters, our God is a God for all people – that means our God loves perfection-seeking Pharisees AND manipulative-tax collectors, AND all persons in between. There's a wideness in God's mercy that extends beyond social and economic limits.

The Pharisee of our story belonged to a religious system, not unlike our current big-c Church, that emphasized and rewarded status and works. It was a pray-to-play system. And as long as the Pharisee believes that a devotion to righteousness is more important than a devotion to God, the Pharisee will stand outside the beloved community. Not because of any flaws, but rather, because he clings to an elite religious status that makes him unwilling to see every person as a child of God, worthy of God's grace and love.

The tax collector of our story belonged to a political system, also not unlike the one we know today, that emphasized a zero-sum gain. It was a pay-to-play system. And so in an effort to accumulate wealth, the

tax collector abandoned a life of decency and righteousness to acquire what he thought would make him happy. We're told he sees this truth, and he admits his angst to God. We're not told what happens next. We're left to wonder if this prayer is the start of something new, or if it's lip service. We're left to wonder if this man will give himself the confidence to call himself a child of God.

Today's text is not an endorsement for the tax collector over the Pharisee. Today's text is a commentary on systems that prevent us from living full and happy lives, systems that prevent us from living into our created purpose: to be children of God!!!

Amy Jill Levine says the parable reminds her of her middle school group study project. She was the smart, devoted, hard-working one. And so were two of her classmates. A fourth was not as bright, nor as devoted, nor as hard-working. Everyone in the group received an A. And she said it bothered her that the hard-workers received the same justice as the not-so-hard-worker.

Years later, she says such justice doesn't bother her anymore. Perhaps the fourth classmate didn't care. Perhaps he manipulated the group, perhaps he took pleasure in watching others do his work, just as the tax collector took pleasure in taking money that wasn't his. Maybe so. But no matter.

Levine claims, "The work we do is still worthwhile! We can afford to be generous. There are other measures of justice – a test, a final grade, a final judgement – in which his contributions or sins will be judged."

The Kingdom of God that Christ proclaims is not fair by any earthly standard. But it is enough. And in that enough-ness is a miraculous grace. It's a grace that finds a place for righteous Pharisees and sinful tax collectors alike.

And I think that's the question this parable poses. Do you want a grace deemed fair by the systems of this world? Or do you want a grace that is enough – a grace that deems the systems of this world unnecessary?

It seems to me the first alternative will leave us asking only lonely prayers of penitence. And it seems to me the second alternative will leave us singing prayers of thanksgiving in the company of God's upright: righteous Pharisees and sinful tax collectors and all other sorts of folks called children of God.

Friends, may God's grace be enough for us this day and every day. Amen.