

11-17-19 SERMON CCI Luke 18: 9-14 Two Men, Two Prayers, Two Verdicts

A minister, a boy scout, and a computer expert were the only passengers on a small plane. The pilot came back to the cabin and said that the plane was going down but there were only three parachutes and four people. The pilot added, "I should have one of the parachutes because I have a wife and three small children." So he took one and jumped. The computer whiz said, "I should have one of the parachutes because I am the smartest man in the world and everyone needs me."

So he took one and jumped. The minister turned to the boy scout and said, "I have lived a good life and the Lord has been good to me. You take the remaining chute and I'll go down with the plane." The boy scout said, "Relax, reverend, the smartest man in the world just picked up my knapsack and jumped out!" Those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

In today's scripture reading, Jesus introduced the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector with these words: "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else." Such an ominous beginning because who of us would ever admit to being so confident of our own righteousness that we believe we have the right to look down on everyone else? We can all think of other people who think too highly of themselves, and treat other people with contempt, but surely not us. We know that only God makes us righteous. So we can relax that Jesus is talking about someone else.

Picture the temple during the late afternoon time of prayer. In the Men's Court, men are standing and praying out loud with their faces lifted and arms raised to heaven. Other men pray silently over to the side. Two men enter the Men's Court to pray. One is a Pharisee, a very religious and holy man, who knew the scriptures, and did his best to avoid contact with sinners and unclean people. He stands tall with his eyes and hands raised toward heaven and begins his prayer with praise- rather like we do here each Sunday morning: "I thank you, God... that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, and adulterers..." Jesus seems to be imitating a morning prayer found in the Talmud that many Jewish men still pray each morning: "God, thank you for not making me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." Either prayer sounds a bit arrogant. Imagine if this morning, during Prayer and Praise, one person thanked God they weren't as sick or old or dumb as the rest of us? The Pharisee's eyes must have been open because then he thanks God that he isn't like that dirty tax collector over there, like he's pointing him out to God. Maybe he even prayed loud enough for the tax collector to hear his prayer and know he didn't belong there.

The Pharisee then thanks God for what he does. "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." There was no requirement to fast every week much less twice a week, so people who fasted twice a week did a lot more than God required. That's pretty devoted. When was the last time we fasted to draw close to God? Devout Pharisees were also known to tithe or give ten per cent of everything, even the spices in their kitchens! Jesus painted an exaggerated picture of self-righteousness for us in this parable. It tempts us to think to ourselves we're not

like that when we pray.... surely we are better than that in our thoughts about others... after all we all got to church this rainy morning when we could have slept in and read the paper, we gave our offering, we sang the songs, we prayed, and we do our best most days to avoid evil and sin. Surely we're better than that.

Now listen to the tax collector over to the side. A tax collector was hated because he made his living collecting heavy taxes for the Romans. Tax collectors were allowed legally to charge more than people owed and to keep the extra for their pay. So tax collectors could get rich while people had to sell their farms to pay their tax bills. Some people might be offended that a tax collector would come to the temple to pray alongside the people he had cheated. But this man doesn't draw attention, doesn't raise his head or his hands, doesn't pray loud enough to be heard. Instead he quietly beats his chest as he asks God for mercy.

Both men got what they asked for from God. The tax collector asked for mercy and went home justified, or right with God, and the Pharisee, who never asked God for a thing, did not. That's right, the Pharisee thanked God for what he was and what he wasn't, but he never asked God for anything. It seems he didn't need anything from God; he was righteous enough on his own. So what is Jesus' point? "All who exalt themselves will be humbled; and all who humble themselves will be exalted." And we can nod and say, "Yes, Jesus, they deserve to be brought down a peg or two. I may have my faults, but at least I'm not a hypocrite like them." And in that moment, how are we different than the Pharisee? It is so easy to slip into judging other people- exalting ourselves by looking down on others.

Those listening that day would have been shocked. The Pharisee is not the holy one- the traitor tax collector is? No way! Pharisees were admired back then. But today, after all these years, being a Pharisee is no longer seen as something to aspire to- we're more likely to despise a Pharisee today, call them self-righteous. We're glad when the Pharisee is the bad guy in the parable because that means we're not. After all, we're not like him. But Jesus' parable turns the table on us like it did that day. We can all list 3 sins that others do that we don't- the Pharisee listed robbers, evildoers, adulterers. The Pharisee was telling the truth in what he said- he was righteous, he did keep the law, better than most. And I could truthfully pray "Thank you, God, that I've never robbed a bank, am not a prostitute, have never committed fraud, and I'm certainly not like that despicable 16-year-old who killed his fellow classmates last week." I would be telling the truth, but I would have fallen into the trap of seeing myself as better than other people just like the Pharisee.

Jesus used this parable to teach about an attitude that is essential for living in the kingdom- the attitude of being humble. Humility is not a virtue that America particularly values. We prefer being # 1: the number 1 sports team, the most successful company, the largest church in the area, winning the Oscar for best actor or actress. Few books are written about the Presidential candidates who didn't win the election. But God's kingdom is not about being #1, it's about following in the footsteps of the Son who humbled himself all the way to death on a cross.

Being humble does not mean seeing ourselves as less than others; humility is seeing ourselves as God sees us, of finding our place by grace and service. It is the opposite of exalting ourselves. The word for humble comes from the image of a farm animal that allows itself to be yoked or harnessed. When it is yoked, the strong animal loses none of its strength; but it allows its strength to be yoked with other animals and directed by the farmer. Jesus used this image when he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am meek and lowly."

Exalting oneself, would be like an animal that refuses to be yoked with others, or the horse that refuses to be broken; people who exalt themselves see themselves as better than others, more knowing, more deserving- like the Pharisee in the parable. They can cause great havoc in the church. I was in a church once when a couple made a power play against the pastor- they made accusations of inappropriate pastoral behavior to a couple board members but demanded that their complaint bypass the pastoral relations committee. They didn't want to yoke themselves with the proper channel for a complaint; they wanted to pick the people who would hear them and they threatened to leave the church if the pastor was not fired. The board refused their demand and they left the church. In that ugly process, the pastor and church were deeply wounded. How many churches are wounded because of painful power plays by people who exalt themselves? Jesus promised that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, in this life or the one to come.

We can also be Pharisees in the way we hold our religious beliefs. Sometimes we hold our beliefs so strongly that we look down on people who see things differently, and treat them with contempt, not caring to hear another point of view, even doubting their faith in God because anyone with real faith would never believe what they believe or do what they do. We can believe we're standing for God when we're really just standing for our beliefs. And we forget that I Peter 3 tells us that as we give an answer for what we believe, we are to do it with gentleness and respect, not contempt, name-calling, or arrogance.

Two men, two prayers, two verdicts. One man knew he was righteous and asked nothing of God; one man knew he was a sinner, and asked God for mercy. They both got what they asked for. But the man depending on his own righteousness went home a sinner; the man depending on God's compassion and mercy went home justified or right in God's eyes. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.