

Community Church of Issaquah  
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The Difficulty in Finding Humility  
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During seminary days, I recall one professor telling our class that we should try to put ourselves in the shoes of the individuals we read about or studied in our New Testament class. I brought to mind that passage from the novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird," when Atticus says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." As I was studying and preparing for the morning's sermon, I tried my best to put myself into the shoes of either a pharisee or a tax collector. Try though I might, I just couldn't quite make that work.

You heard the Scripture passage from Luke regarding the difference in prayers of these two men. Do you think you could walk around in that skin or those shoes? There couldn't be a more dramatic difference in the two individuals briefly mentions in this short episode. Here we have a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. Let me clarify who these men were in the society in the day of Christ.

Pharisees were men who were members of a certain party who believed in the resurrection and in following specific legal traditions that were not what we find in the Bible but the traditions of their ancestors. Oral traditions. Like those who were called "Scribes," Pharisees were considered legal expert. That connection is why these two groups are often mentioned together in Biblical passages. Pharisees were mostly middle-class business persons who also were designated leaders in the synagogues. Even though they

were a minority, the Bible implies that they had more control in decision-making because they had more popular support among Jewish people. Those Pharisees who followed the rabbi Shammai followed the strictest interpretation of the law. These followers had a strong hatred for anything Roman, especially taxation. For them, any Jew who served as a tax collector was to be excluded from their religious life – *persona non grata*.

And then there were the tax collectors. These men were among the most hated and regarded as sinners. They were Jews who worked from the Roman occupiers, so they were considered traitors. Those living in the territory captured by the Romans resented having to pay taxes to their captors. Tax collectors were not paid by the Roman government. Instead, they were expected to collect extra money that they could keep for themselves. As you can imagine, many tax collectors were dishonest and abused their job and the system by taking far too much money from their Jewish neighbors.

Not all tax collectors were despicable, however. Perhaps you remember a certain disciple named Matthew whose profession before becoming a follower of Jesus was exactly that of tax collector. Or perhaps you remember the story of a rich and corrupt tax collector named Zacchaeus who was the chief tax collector for Jericho. Here's a man who heard about Jesus and wanted to know more, so he climbed into a tree so he could see just who this new rabbi was. When Jesus saw him and asked to come down, Zacchaeus invited Jesus into his home and that encounter changed his life forever.

So, there we have the two characters in this short Scripture passage that has a very powerful message for all of us even

today. It was customary for Jews to pray three times each day, similar to the Muslim call to prayer. When they could, faithful Jews would go to the temple for private prayers. This was the scene for this story today. Why Jesus was at the temple isn't clarified, but we can assume that, like other faithful followers of God, he had gone to pray himself. Had he not witnessed this experience, it would only be a fable or story, not a parable of learning from a life witnessed by others. Thus begins the comparison of two very different approaches to prayer.

A pharisee stands up so that he is noticed which was the usual practice of that time, and begins praying only about himself. His message to God was clear – “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Why did he feel it necessary to remind God that he fasted twice each week or that he gave his tithe or money like Prophet Malachi told him to do? Perhaps his prayer would have been complete with a pounding of his chest or patting himself on the back. If I were in his shoes, I'm sure I'd be saying, “I'm pretty awesome, aren't I God? I'm a cool dude.” Then perhaps he sat back down with a grin on his face.

Next the despised tax collector stood up for his turn and put his head down and continued to hit himself to show how repentant he was for being a sinner. Acknowledging that he was well aware that he needed God to forgive him, his prayer rang with humility and honesty.

What was Jesus' lesson for us about this experience? This is what He said, “I tell you that this man (the tax collector)

rather than the other (the Pharisee) went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” The comparison between these two men and the way each prayed has a lesson for all of us today as well.

I don't eavesdrop on anyone's private prayers, I promise. So, I have no idea how anyone prays or what manner they approach their conversation with the Lord. But I am sure of this one thing – it is the humble person whose prayers are best received by a listening God. But there's that word again, “humble” that reflects a character steeped in humility or selflessness. I don't know about you, but there are times when I find it very difficult to be humble or to reflect my own humility.

In our society today, there are so many individuals and groups of people that we look at with much disdain and sometimes even contempt. It would be easy to note the newsmakers who we condemn as worthless and despicable, and like the Pharisee, we would defend ourselves before God expressing our gratitude that we are not like “the person.” I don't have to list a name here, because I am sure we all have a list of those we do not like. These days, my list is growing by leaps and bounds.

This raises the question, “How do I remain humble in the midst of this chaos?” First, we have to remind ourselves that none of us are perfect either. True, there would never be a day when we would commit the atrocities we read about or see every day. If we were to choose which of these two Biblical characters we would want to be most like, I am

pretty sure that most of us would choose the tax collector. With head bowed, we would want to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, understanding that like the tax collector, we might be in a place in our lives that does not display perfection.

The bottom-line message of this story is simple. Come before God as you – no one else but you. Yes, we could stand before our Lord and say, “Look at me, Lord, I’ve really done a lot of good stuff and I deserve some recognition.” But is that humility? I don’t think so. The person who has the personal trait of humility does not need to remind God of the things he or she has done. That’s the past. Moving on. Continuing to do what we believe God calls us to do as followers.

My mother was an excellent example of a humble person. She lived her life for others and never asked to be recognized for anything she did. Sitting at the table one Wednesday during the church fellowship dinner, she overheard a young high school girl telling a friend that her mother had kicked her out of the house and she had no place to go. Without hesitating, my mother told the young woman to get her things and come home with her. The situation resulted from the girl’s mother who had some serious mental issues and this was the cause of the teenager being evicted. When my mother and the young woman got home, my mom learned that there was another younger sister experiencing the same thing. The next day my mom drove to the house and found the younger sister sitting on the front porch crying. Taking the young girl by the hand, she took her home as well. The two of them

moved in with my mother with the support for their dad who was divorced from the mom. They lived at my mother's until both had finished high school and began college. These two women now have families of their own and are still considered a part of our own family. Certainly, this was praiseworthy, and an example of doing God's work. My mother never spoke about what she had done and few people knew the circumstances. To quote the scripture closure of today's passage, "He (or she) who humbles himself will be exalted."

When I was in college, I remember a short verse from our student poetry book. It went like this:

*When all of life is read to me,  
And all the world its judgement sees,  
The things that meant the most to God  
Were done in secret, not in mobs.*

We all know that it is definitely true that humility is hard to find and even harder to be the guiding principle for living each day. Today's Biblical lesson is more of a reminder than a scolding. If we imagine ourselves in the shoes of either of the two prayer makers, we would be able to see what God wants for us as we live and pray. Your attitude is very important to God. When you approach the Lord in prayer or in your daily living, remember that God wants you to be aware that you – like all of us – are a sinner and that when you acknowledge that and repent as an act of humility, you will be exalted. And those who choose to spend their time with God exalting themselves will at some point in life be humbled. That's God's promise.

I'm not looking for anyone to give me an award or even a pat on the back for anything I have done in my years as a disciple of Christ. That's God's job. My goal in life is to listen to the Lord, to do what I believe He is calling me to do, and to try as hard as I can to reflect the love we all receive from God. Like the tax collector, and like you, I'll be happy to hear the Lord say when I arrive at home in heaven, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." Then I'll know for sure that I practiced humility.