

Proper 25C  
Luke 18:9-14  
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October 23, 2016

### Trusting in God or Ourselves

Jesus' parables can appear to be simple. These stories may seem so straightforward, that we inadvertently rush through them, jumping to a quick interpretation, particularly when we know some of the backstory.

Today's gospel is a good example. We could rush to label those praying people Jesus describes, identifying who's the good guy or the bad guy. After all, we know that often in the Gospels, the Pharisees are portrayed as routinely opposing Jesus, criticizing him about his actions. It could be natural for us to quickly assume that today's story is all about a self-righteous hypocrite — a self-absorbed Pharisee, overly proud of what he has accomplished, in contrast to the humble tax collector, the guy who's right with God. Isn't this story pointing us away from self-pride and instead towards that right direction of being humble?

But parables are meant to provoke and disturb. There's always more to consider than what we first may hear.

If we were in Jesus' time, listening to this story for the first time, we would hear his description of the Pharisee's prayer as that of a pious man. We wouldn't have thought that Jesus was mocking him, or creating a not-so-subtle caricature of piety, but we would have heard a common rabbinic prayer of thanksgiving, something that was as familiar and known to us as saying "God is great, God is good," at meal time, or "Now I lay me down to sleep," at bedtime. We would recognize this prayer of thanksgiving and know how right and good it is to give thanks to God.

So when Jesus says that it's the tax collector, *not* the Pharisee who was justified by God we would have been shocked. You could have heard a pin drop. This reversal of what we thought was normal, would not have been expected.

So what's really going on here?

We need to take the time to look more closely at the Pharisee, and try not jump to judgment. And I'll start off by freely admitting that as I studied this passage, I found that I do really empathize with the Pharisee. He's trying. He's trying to live a righteous life. He prays routinely, he fasts, he tithes, he worships regularly. He's actively striving to live a life following God, purposefully setting himself apart from the ways of the world by his faithful actions.

Many of us try to do exactly that — we try to live good and righteous lives. And although I don't think I've ever said, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people," I know that at times, when seeing others in life's really rough circumstances, that I have thought, and perhaps even said out loud, "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

I imagine I'm not the only one here, who has had that thought pop into their head.

And if we think about this sentiment, if we examine our feelings closely, we may find that our own innermost thoughts do come awfully close to those of the Pharisee.

So what is Jesus telling us?

We're being pointed towards understanding that the Pharisee has missed the true nature of his blessing, for he is trusting in himself. He presumes he's righteous, for he's doing all the right things. And although he addresses his prayer of gratitude to the Lord, it's really about himself; it's about his actions and his own being. The Pharisee is not so much grateful *to* God as he is grateful when he compares himself *to others*. He's crossed that invisible line, shifted from thanking God for his blessings, towards thanking God that he's not like those other people.

It's pretty easy to begin to lean towards trusting too much in ourselves, towards believing that our own actions, our own self-discipline, our own sense of control is what makes us righteous. After all, aren't we pleased when we're doing the right things? We may have really worked hard, disciplining ourselves to do what is right, making sure we're worshiping routinely, praying regularly, giving faithfully to the church. We're proud that we're trying to live into our faith by following Jesus, by striving to do all these good things.

And all that is good, for our Lord and Savior does asks us to follow him.

But we, like the Pharisee, need to be careful about recognizing that grace is a gift, not a possession; recalling that our trust, above all else, needs to be in God, for all our gifts come from God.

C.S. Lewis, in the book *Mere Christianity*, provides a wonderful analogy to help describe God's grace. He writes,

Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to His service you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense his own already ... It is like a small child going to its father and saying, 'Daddy, give me sixpence to buy you a birthday present.' It is all very nice and proper, but only an idiot would think that the father is sixpence to the good on the transaction."

All we have is from God. No matter how hard we work, nor how creative or gifted we are, nor how much good we do is actually attributed to us, to our own doing...for all we have is given to us from God.

Luke tells us that Jesus shared this parable with those who trusted in themselves, who thought they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. But were those 1st century listeners really different than any of us?

This parables challenges us to look more closely at ourselves. Do we truly trust in God or in ourselves and our capabilities? Do we compare ourselves to others, dividing humanity into who's in and who's out? For when we create divisions — whether it's the self-righteous vs humble; or righteous vs sinners; or divisions based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, nationality — when we draw those lines that separate us from others, we may find that God is on the other side.

For we are all sinners, justified only through God's grace. All any of us can truly claim is our complete dependency on God's mercy and that it is through grace alone that we can live into the hope of salvation through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we move into this new week, I'd ask that each of us watch closely how we react to those we encounter — those we see on the street, those we hear of through the news, and those the world may be telling us that we need to view with hatred or fear.

And then ask ourselves, how is God challenging me to see this person and to respond my neighbor? When I look at another, do I see a beloved child of God, or do I pull back, considering that they are other? Am I willing to open myself, with God's help, to more fully trust in Jesus Christ, our Lord?

Today, we're all facing a constantly escalating and divisive social rhetoric. I don't expect that to dissipate until things settle down after our November elections. So I invite you all to pray with me the Prayer for the Human Family, found on page 815 of the BCP.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.