“***Other Rogues***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Oct. 27, 2019

[**Sirach 35:12-17**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=284)

12 Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford.   
13 For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold.

14 Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it; 15 and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality.

16 He will not show partiality to the poor; but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.

17 He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint.

**Luke 18:9–14**

9He 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. 11The 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. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But 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.”

We start with the book of Sirach, or ben Sirach. For early Christians, this was part of the Bible. I’m talking about the period before there was a New Testament. “Bible” meant Old Testament, but which version? For most Christians, it was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Besides the books translated from the Hebrew Bible, it contained some books that were found only in Greek like Sirach, written around 180 b.c. As I say, the Septuagint was Scripture for the early church, so I think the Catholics and the Orthodox are right to regard these works as part of the Bible. Most Protestants, however, consign these works, like Sirach, to an appendix they call the Apocrypha. The reason is that Martin Luther banished from the Old Testament all books not preserved in Hebrew. Your Bible may have Sirach in an Apocrypha section, or it may not have Sirach at all. I could say more about this issue, but probably in a Bible study.

Sirach is rather pessimistic about human nature, but I find it to be an honest and intriguing work. It has a very high concept of God’s goodness. It says God will be fair and compassionate to the poor, will defend them, and yet “will not show partiality to the poor” (Sir 35:16). God shows no partiality. Another line that is interesting is “Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it” (35:14). Why does he go out of his way to say this? Probably because some people *are* indeed trying to bribe God, that is, trying to impress or persuade God with sacrifices and with a display of worship. This puts Sirach on the same wavelength as the early prophets Isaiah and Micah, who railed against those who thought they could bribe God with “the blood of bulls, or of lambs” (Isa 1:11), or “with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil,” as Micah mockingly says (Mic 6:7).

Sirach is clear on this point: God is just and impartial, and cannot be persuaded by sacrifices. His other main point is that God is compassionate to the widows and others who have suffered injustice. God listens to the complaint of the widow, the orphan, to *all* vulnerable people. Sirach is affirming the values that were taught by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Sirach is too recent to be considered a prophet, but he builds on their work. If fact, he shows us how revered the books of the prophets were by the second century b.c.

Jesus embodies the same values, the same desire for honest piety and goodness, not show-off religiosity. The Pharisee in today’s parable is only superficially good, just righteous enough to make a big donation to the temple treasury, and then to look down his nose at common people, calling them thieves, rogues, and adulterers. I don’t think they’re rogues at all, but just ordinary people who are not socially respectable, like the tax collector, at whom he sneers. Actually, many of us might be in the category of “other rogues,” in the eyes of those who are socially respectable, well-off, and superficially religious. The parable is not primarily about social status, but about pride, egotism, and arrogance *about* one’s image and social status compared to others. The Pharisee is full of himself, and that is the quality that Jesus is condemning.

Being considered a rogue by those who are arrogant and hypocritical is not the worst thing in the world. The tax collector might even have considered it funny. The Pharisee in the story looks ridiculous, and his sneering at others is simply foolish.

Obviously, Jesus is teaching us to avoid the arrogance of that character. As long as we are not using our religious practice and our respectability to think that we have some special status with God, then we are learning the lesson that *both* Sirach and Jesus are teaching.

You can’t manipulate God. You can’t nudge God along, or get special favors. It may not be possible to get God to deliver you from the unfairness that life will throw at you. Sometimes it rains on us. We have to draw on our faith, use our wisdom and experience, and do our best during good times and hard times. We pray *not* in order to change God, but to allow God to change *us*: to calm us, to empower us, to deepen us. The Bible warns us about the wrong way of praying, but that has nothing to do with technique. There is no right or wrong technique for praying. The great prayer, the prayer that is always answered, is the *honest* prayer. God always answers that by deepening our spiritual capacity.

Pray whatever you are honestly moved to pray, *trusting* that God loves you and wants to fill your cup. Prayer is a cup held up to be filled. This kind of prayer *cannot fail* to be answered—answered with spiritual power.

Maybe we are all really widows and orphans who need God’s help, if only we would realize it. It is the widows and orphans who *swell* with gratitude and love when they learn that God hears their prayer and responds. We have to trust that goodness will prevail, even when we see the arrogant and the lazy-minded prospering for a season. God hears the needy orphan, the lonely widow. God sends that one home justified, renewed. Jesus takes the side of the widow, the scorned, and *anyone* who needs his help. Hold up the cup of prayer and let God fill it.