

“Resisting Toxic Faith”

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Luke 18:9-14

CHILDREN’S TIME

When I was little, I used to have all kinds of toys. Some of my favorites were ones that I could build things with like legos, and Lincoln Logs. Here is my Lincoln Logs from more than 40 years ago! My brother and I each had a set and we used to play with them all the time. Let’s see how tall of a tower we can build before it comes crashing down.

(Build a tower until it crashes down. Then put away the blocks.)

Jesus taught his disciples that whenever people brag about how good they are and about the great things that they do, they are headed for a fall. He told a story about two men who went to worship one day. One of the men bragged about all of the great things he did and thanked God that he wasn’t like others, who did bad things.

The other man, instead of bragging about himself, covered his face,

and very humbly asked God to forgive him for all of the times he failed to be the kind of person that God wanted him to be.

Jesus was not very impressed with all of the boasting of the first man. Most of the things he did, he did to impress other people. Instead, Jesus said that being humble, like the second man, was much better.

SERMON

Jesus highlighted two different traits of unhealthy toxic faith in a parable recorded by Luke, and then he offered a remedy.

Let’s listen to the story.

READ LUKE 18:9-14

The first toxic trait is self-righteous arrogance. In the parable, Jesus spoke of a Pharisee who walked into the temple to pray and essentially said “Lord, I thank you that I am better than everyone else ... in particular that tax collector over there.”

In his prayer to “God” (it wasn’t really for God, but to look good in front of everyone else), the Pharisee gave his reasons why he was so much better than others.

He did this by pointing to the behavior of others and comparing it with his own.

He pointed out those who stole things that were not their own, the thieves. Then he stuck his nose in the air and said “But I don’t do that.” Then he talked about those who were rogue agents, working to stir up trouble against the system. “I am not one of those political zealots,” he said with pride.

He then turned to the moral failings of others by pointing his finger at those who committed adultery. He, himself would never think of doing such a thing and therefore he was morally far more righteous than those.

Finally, the Pharisee looked over into the corner at the tax collector, who was lying face down thinking it was disgraceful to not even raise his head to acknowledge God. “I thank you God that I am not like him. He is part of the most corrupt profession around.”

“But I am part of a more noble and spiritually righteous practice of religious faith. I have completed all of the training. I have performed all of the right rituals. I follow the religious and civil law and give a tenth of all of my income to God’s

work. On top of all of this, I fast twice every week in order to be more holy than anyone else I know.

“Surely God, you see all of this and will bless me.”

This self-righteous arrogance has plagued us in the Church, because this is often how people see us from the outside.

Now let’s be real. A version of the Pharisee is tempting to us. We are tempted to allow this self-righteous attitude to creep in around the edges. There are times (Are there not?) when we look at the people outside the church and determine they are not as enlightened, not as educated, as wise, or socially important as us. We might even determine people’s lives to be shallow because they are not up to the important things of God like us.

While we may never speak the words, in our hearts do we see ourselves as superior to those who are not committed to the good God-centered ministry that we are in the church?

Or, what about our position politically. Do we consider ourselves better and superior to those who stand across the aisle from us? Are we able to see them

as honest human beings who, like us, are interested in a better world?

Yes, religion and politics are two big areas where self-righteousness becomes a challenge for us. In what other areas do we struggle with this toxic sin?

Let's be clear, self-righteousness and arrogance taken to its end point is violence, and we have witnessed this prominently in the news this past week.

We saw, pipe bombs sent to prominent political figures and those willing to speak out on political issues. We witnessed a racially-based shooting at a Kroger in Kentucky.

Then, it was self-righteous, anti-semitic violence we witnessed yesterday at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg that left 11 people dead and six injured.

We cannot allow self-righteous arrogance to insidiously creep into our faith.

The second trait of toxic faith that Jesus highlighted in his parable was similar to the first. It is judgmentalism. This is noted at the beginning of the passage where Jesus talked about those who

regard others with contempt. The Pharisee not only saw himself as better, than others but also held judgement over fellow worshipers, including the tax collector who was praying for mercy.

As human beings we are easily swept into this power game of judgmentalism. It is often what is done in this world to get ahead.

When someone is judgmental. They will cut down and criticize others to make themselves feel or look better. The catch is that it never actually has this end result — even if they win the election. Judging others will never actually elevate a person.

How many times have you (or someone you were with) seen someone out in a beautiful dress with meticulous makeup and accessories, or that guy with the perfect hair and tux, and say something to the effect of “I hate her (him)” which is then followed by some kind of judgmental comment about that person's possible faults or lacking. “I bet they have marriage problems.” or “Surely they just filed for bankruptcy.”

The judgmental comments actually say much more about the speaker than the person they are

addressing. So, rather than boosting their position, they have actually sunk lower.

We can hear Jesus saying “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” or as he said after this parable, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is the main reason cited for why people avoid the church like the plague. They know that being judgmental is toxic and they steer clear!

Now we know that whether or not any particular congregation is judgmental, people from the outside don't particularly care, because the stereotype is strong enough to keep them away.

Jesus spoke a fair amount about judging others. During the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 he said,

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log

is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Matt 7:1-5)

Paul wrote about the same thing to the Romans.

“Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” (Romans 2:1)

Rather than embracing the ways of arrogant self-righteousness or judgmentalism, as Jesus followers we are encouraged to be more like the tax collector in the parable, who knew he was a sinner and was repenting and praying for mercy. This person went home justified while the religious leader remained full of guilt.

Humility is the remedy for the toxic faith described in the parable.

Humility will have one, like the tax collector, soberly assessing their own guilt, their own failings, and genuinely approaching God with a plea for mercy and forgiveness. These are the ones who humbly approach God not with

comparisons to others, but recognizing the condition of their own heart.

These are the ones who are truly looking to repent, which means to turn in a different direction, toward true righteousness.

Psalm 51 declares King David's own failings. This is the scripture from which the song we sang earlier came: "Create In Me A Clean Heart."

You might know the story. David lusted after a woman whose husband was in his army. After he slept with her, he went to significant lengths to have her husband killed. After being called out by the prophet Nathan, he came face-to-face with his own sin.

This psalm was David's moment of repentance, like the prayer of the tax collector. Imagine him facedown in a dark corner, in touch with his own failings, and in the most honest way possible, weeping to God about his sin and asking for God's mercy.

This is how Psalm 51 begins,

*"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;*

*according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.*

*Wash me thoroughly from my
iniquity, and cleanse me from my
sin.*

*For I know my transgressions, and
my sin is ever before me."*

Then further down, David continued,

*"Create in me a clean heart, O
God, and put a new and right spirit
within me.*

*Do not cast me away from your
presence, and do not take your
holy spirit from me.*

*Restore to me the joy of your
salvation, and sustain in me a
willing spirit."*

This is the posture of a humble follower of Jesus.