

Luke 18: 9-14 “Glad That’s Not Me” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/28/25

There is a story about a woman who had been trying for years to persuade her egotistical husband to put an end to the idea he and he alone was number one. He never stopped talking about being first in sales in the office, first for the next promotion. He enjoyed playing tennis and golf but only if he won. He had to be first in line to buy tickets for a game and first to hit the parking lot after the event. Sound familiar to any of you? In any case, his wife watched with interest one day when he stepped onto one of those fortune-telling scales. He dropped a coin into the slot and out came a little “fortune-telling card” which read: “You are a born leader, with superior intelligence, quick wit, and charming manner. You have a magnetic personality and are attractive to the opposite sex.” “Ha!” he said, “Read that!” She did and then turned the card over and said, “Hmm... it has your weight way off as well.”

Jesus tells a story about two people who come to the temple to pray, with surprisingly different results. Compared to the Pharisee, the tax collector didn’t have a prayer for he was an utter sinner. When it came to praying, he could only manage 7 words “God be merciful to me a sinner.” He was among the most despised in first-century culture because of his occupation. Tax collectors collaborated with a despised foreign government and not only were they collecting taxes, an estimated 83% of one’s income, but they also violated their ties with their own people and religious heritage by doing so. The Pharisee, on the other hand, was among the religious elite. The group known as the Pharisees had such a strong grasp of God and a deep faith, that they helped Judaism survive the holocaust of Jerusalem in 70 AD. On the surface, people admired them. They get a really bad rap in the New Testament which spawned generations of anti-Semitism. Yet, there would have been Pharisees who would have been greatly disappointed and shocked by the behavior of the one in Jesus’ story.

This story is one of many of Jesus’ stories that emphasizes God’s love for sinners. Such stories share a unique characteristic – they are all addressed directly to Jesus’ critics. These parables don’t just announce the good news, they also vindicate

it. As Joaquin Jeremias says, “They are a controversial weapon against the enemies of the Gospel who are indignant that Jesus should declare that God cares for sinners.” Some of these parables describe what sinners are like, namely that true prodigals have no pretenses or excessive self-importance. Others invite the self-righteous to consider what they are like, and finally there are those who describe what God is like. In the Prodigal Son, we see a bit of all three, the self-righteous, the sinner, and God, as we do today. The temple worshippers who come to pray are set up as polar opposites. One models death-dealing, the other life-giving. And Jesus plays the reversal card, speaking on behalf of God, giving that shocking conclusion he is so good at. The Pharisee was religiously righteous and, dare I say, could be any one of us regular church attenders. He practiced fasting twice a week, never mind that it was always on Mondays and Thursdays when the markets of that time were open so he could parade in sackcloth for everyone to see. He sought to live a holy life, being a dependable tither who paid the salaries of ministers so they can preach on the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Paul was a Pharisee, and in many ways Jesus’ own theology reflects their views – but with a twist. It might be good to know that Jesus wasn’t alone in his critique of Pharisees – it was shared by many rabbis, who would joke of their own leanings towards self-righteousness. Disciples of Christ scholar Ron Allen notes that “Jewish humor, influenced by the prophetic traditions, was often at their own expense. We should develop Christian humor at our own expense, of telling jokes on ourselves. It would help keep us humble.” I like the one about the minister who was greeting folks as they were leaving worship and one woman came up and said, “I enjoyed the sermon, Pastor.” The minister responded, “Well don’t thank me, thank the Lord.” The lady responded, “It wasn’t *that* good.” The Pharisees’ narcissism got the best of him at times as he looked down on others and prayed loudly about himself, whereas the tax collector could barely pray at all. Church guy was smug and confident while the outsider was anxious and insecure. He stood in the center of the temple while the other stood at a distance, as if his physical distance from the sacred building expressed his spiritual alienation. The righteous man stood up, the sinful

man looked down. The Masai tribe in West Africa understand the difference. They express thanks by putting their foreheads on the ground, saying “My head is in the dirt,” recognizing that giving thanks is, at the heart, an act of humility.

I can’t help but wonder, as we approach an impending government shutdown if we hear this passage about the tax collector, a government worker, a little differently. In light of all that has been happening of late, we may or may not feel bad for the tax collector, some believing he should indeed beg for mercy while others believing he is getting what he deserves. You may not know this, but the tax collector was also part of the elite class of society, albeit, at the very bottom of the elite. His job paid so little that he couldn’t possibly make ends meet for his family, so he was encouraged by his superiors to extort money from the peasants. As to how he coerced people to give him this extra money, it often came down to playing the town bully. He was often seen as the hired thug in any gangster movie coming to collect a debt and to be clear, he worked for the Pharisee! Therefore, to summarize the Pharisee as the villain and the publican as the hero would be to misunderstand Jesus’ intent. If the Pharisee is the bad guy and the tax man is the hero, then each got what they deserved. There is no grace and the parable is robbed. It is essential to remember they both have their faults as they walk into that temple. What they both receive is “in spite of” their faults and not “because of” who they are. The last thing we want to leave today saying is “Gosh I’m glad I’m not the Pharisee! I’m glad that’s not me!” Because it is possible the reversal could be reversed.

Hopefully, we leave today recognizing the real difference between these two characters. It falls to judgment versus confession, labelling others versus self-reflection, taking the log out of our eye before taking the splinter out of our neighbor’s. It plays out as society demands proof and self-justification from us all the time. What’s your zip code, your salary, the car you drive? How successful are your kids? What kind of shape are you in? You are judged by your answers. I confess I fall into the trap of labeling folks on the good or bad side all too often, politically, socially, even religiously and a voice inside says, “Thank God I have it more right than they do.”

Sometimes it comes down to folks who rub us the wrong way, and we can't even look at them for fear we will give our true feelings away. We must learn to acknowledge that fault, confess it, and cry out, "Have mercy on me O God, a sinner!" One author wrote, "The person who knows their sins is greater than the person who raises the dead by their prayer. The one who sighs and grieves within themselves for an hour is greater than one who teaches the entire universe. The one who follows Christ, alone and contrite, is greater than the one who enjoys the favor of crowds in churches."

Another way to look at, according to Thomas a Kempis is, "If you see another stumble or fall, let your first thought be that, of all people, you are most likely to stumble or fall in that same manner." True humility not only contradicts self-importance which proclaims we are above others, it is also sets aside self-loathing that tends to denigrate a human being, in this case, ourselves, who are made in the image of God. I have long been disturbed at our culture's appetite for feasting on fallen celebrities—Marilyn Monroe, Tiger Woods, Michael Jackson, Matthew Perry...the list stretches far back in history. When will we question whether creating such celebrities doesn't in fact set these folks up to collapse into their own shadows? This past week we saw two famous people model what Jesus is teaching in our parable, some would say coming at life from opposite sides. Both choking back tears, Erika Kirk stated she forgave the man who killed her husband and Jimmy Kimmel stated he never meant to lessen the horrific death of Charlie Kirk. Both chose the higher and humbler path, when they could have argued against the critics in self-righteous indignation. To live without self-justification can make us feel vulnerable, but when you think about it, it can be very liberating. As soon as you accept that you have been embraced by a good God, you never, for any reason, need to prove yourself. The moment we humble ourselves and breathe the words of the tax collector, God have mercy on me, a sinner, casting ourselves upon God, we experience life-giving love and grace. As St. Augustine said, "There is something in humility which strangely exalts the heart and something in pride which debases it." And Jesus shockingly concludes, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."