

The Self-Righteous Dilemma

Luke 18: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But 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!’ 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.”

Jesus told the parable to some who thought themselves to be righteous and regarded others with contempt...

There was a social experiment where sociologists hired an actress to walk through a busy shopping area courtyard. They hid the cameras in a tree and rolled the film. The actress, wearing business casual attire, walked through the courtyard and purposefully tumbled to the ground. Once she fell the stopwatch began ticking to see how long before someone came to her assistance. Over and over again, the clock would barely make it beyond ten seconds before someone rushed over to help her. It gives us a boost to our faith in humanity. But then they dressed the same actress in different clothing. Baggy flannel shirt, holey jeans, hair disheveled making her appear to be a street person. She too walked into the center of the court, tumbled to the ground and the stopwatch began counting. One minute...three minutes...ten minutes...fifteen minutes she lays on the ground, and nobody checked to see if she was okay! The point: our brains make snap judgements about who is deserving and who is not. It happens at shopping malls, it happens in the church, and it happens in the parable.

At the outset, the Pharisee is doing nothing wrong. He offers thanks for his life's blessings: he doesn't have to steal a meal, he doesn't break the laws, he is disciplined, and his job warrants him the thrill of being a spiritual leader and scholar of the bible. All of this is fine. Where he gets himself into trouble is where he passes judgement: “And thank God I'm not like that no-good-traitor-to-his-people tax collector over there.” Even the Pharisee's judgement is true. There in the distance stands a tax collector who is in the same temple he extorts for a living. Tax-collectors are a pawn for empirical oppression and a disgrace to their people. But there he is beating his chest, not able to bring himself to face the heavens. He is ashamed, grieving, undeserving.

I confess, I'm probably more like the Pharisee. I like to be right. I can fall into a mode of self-righteousness where I believe I'm on the justified side of things. Oh, I may participate in the same racially unequitable system as everyone else, but thank God I'm more “woke” than the

person over there wearing the red MAGA cap.¹ Or, I may be a servant in a denomination that statistically prefers to hear male voices from the pulpit, but at least I am not like that fundi preacher who was telling women preachers to “go home.” It seems everyone today—on both sides—believe themselves to be the right ones when comparing themselves to the other side. I get why the Pharisee sees himself as more justified, because I do it too! It is so much easier to judge someone else’s actions with contempt than it is to confess our own actions or inactions with humility.

So maybe we would like to see ourselves as more like the tax-collector. How many sermons have we heard that have told us to be like the tax-collector and NOT like the Pharisee? Except, here is where the parable traps us. As soon as we are told to not be like the Pharisee, we end up judging the Pharisee, and in the process we become like the Pharisee! We automatically self-correct to justify ourselves! But if getting it right is the goal we fall into the dangerous trap of making God too small. It is how God ends up becoming angry, judgmental, grumpy and disliking all the same people we do.

The truth is we have a little bit of both Pharisee and tax-collector in us. We work really hard at justifying ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, but we also are humbled by the reality that we do get it wrong, we make mistakes and feel ashamed, and sometimes we will choose being right over being open. It’s not easy. As someone once said, “O God, make me humble once a day, but *only once a day!*” Because in the humbling moments, we are reminded that we are all-too-human.

When is a time when you felt humbled? When is the last time you felt your humanness?

In seminary I was invited to a bible study at a men’s homeless shelter. We would read a psalm or another passage and then share what resonated for us. The passage of the day was Jesus saying, “Foxes have dens, birds have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to rest his head.” As a third-year seminary student I went into the room thinking I was going to be offering my theological prowess. After long-winded explanations of the Greek meaning for words and theological tidbits, it came the men’s turn to share what they heard in the passage. Looking at me one of them said:

“Jesus was a prophet, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And prophets were homeless, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And John the Baptist was homeless?”

“Yes.”

“And the Old Testament prophets, most of them were homeless, too?”

“Why yes, that’s correct,” I said.

“Well, I might not know the Greek words, but if Jesus was homeless and John the Baptist was

¹ The term “woke” refers to a white person who is aware of racial inequities and injustices, as well as someone who realizes they are privileged because of their whiteness.

homeless and the prophets of the Old Testament were homeless, my life is probably more like Jesus's than yours is!"

Humbled by the homeless man's words, it changed how I saw everything. Especially how I saw the gospel as the teachings of a homeless rabbi who experienced the world from under Interstate bridges and taught in worn-down church basements. It made the gospel less about getting it right and more about being human.

Jesus says all that exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. It's not easy. Thankfully, there is a God who offers more grace than we could possibly imagine. To the Pharisee, the tax-collector, and the rest of us in between.