

## The Distance Between Us

*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 lift up his eyes 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.”

When I was in middle school gym class we would play a game called “Cops and Robbers.” Remember the rules? The group called the “robbers” were in a circle in the middle of the room. There were hula hoops all around the gym with bean bags inside the hula hoops, which represented the loot the robbers were to steal. The cops wandered the areas trying to tag the robbers, sending them to jail while the robbers tried to capture the loot without getting tagged. It was a fun game, but the interesting thing was that most of us weren’t interested in being the robbers, but wanted to be the cops—you know, the ones catching the “bad guys.” The desire to be on the morally correct side, while seeing the other side as the “bad guys” seems to be a hole we all dig ourselves into—especially these days. So Jesus tells a parable about a couple of fellas in the temple. One a “good guy” Pharisee. The other a “bad guy” tax collector.

So let’s begin by imagining who we are in the story. Maybe we see ourselves in the Pharisee’s shoes. After all, he offers thanks to God for his life. He doesn’t have to beg for a meal or wonder where he will sleep at night. He has a meaningful job and friends he can rely on. So in gratitude he donates his time at the food pantry. Gives 10% of his money away. He does what he can to align himself with God’s desire for his life. Do we not also give thanks for our life and our family and for the things we have? Even when the Pharisee snarks about not being like the tax collector over there he’s not wrong! The tax collector is a servant of the oppressor. He inflates Roman tax rates so he can skim off the top for himself. He’s a lowlife without a conscience. But often we hear sermons which tell us that we are not to be like the Pharisee who judges, but the tax collector who cries out, “Be merciful for I know what I’m doing is wrong!” And while we may not connect with being a crook, we might begin to feel for the remorseful tax collector, don’t we? After all, we have all done something in our lives we are sorry for. So which one are we? The faithful Pharisee who is feeling self-righteous, or the corrupt tax collector who is feeling repentant, or both?

But be careful how we answer! The parable is tricky. You see, whichever side we choose to associate with we end up in a self-righteous trap. If I say I relate to the Pharisee, which I personally do, then I too say, “Thank God, I’m not like that person over there.” On the other hand, if I feel for the tax collector and believe what the Pharisee is doing is wrong—which I do!—I am also saying, “Thank God I’m not like that self-righteous Pharisee!” The parable traps us. Which is why Jesus tells it. Because some believed themselves to be more self-righteous, while regarding others with contempt.

Well, it's our world, isn't it? Our groups are in sibling rivalry. One side says to the other side, "You're hypocrites!" While the other side says, "Well, at least I'm not like you!" I mean, one side might participate in the same racist system as everyone else, but thank God we are more "woke" than that white supremacy over there. While the other side says, "Well at least I'm not someone who claims to be working for the poor when only working with the rich!"

The truth is both sides can be hypocrites about different things. Both sides hide behind their self-righteousness armor. Both sides blame the other side for the reason the country is falling apart. Early voting opened this week. Which means we get to watch a lot more political attack ads—at least from one side. The other side says they are taking the higher ground. And while I wholeheartedly agree with the strategy, notice the language. Taking the higher ground assumes we are looking down upon someone else. And then we find ourselves trapped by the parable again! It is very tricky! Which is why Jesus tells it. "Some believed themselves that they were righteous while regarding others with contempt."

So what do we do? How do we escape the self-righteous bind? In the story there is a detail I hadn't paid much attention to. It says the tax collector was standing far off. It is the same word between another parable about the poor beggar, Lazarus, and the rich man to describe the distance between them. You see, it insinuates that self-righteousness creates a wide gap between us. So how do we close the gap?

Some time ago I sat with an old PCUSA minister who was Vietnamese. He was an activist who, while living in Vietnam, spoke out against the war in Vietnam. For speaking out, he was tossed in prison where he was beaten daily for treason. After several months of contempt, he says he asked God to change his perspective about the enemy—which by the way is what the word for "repent" means in the New Testament, *metanoia*. He said God showed him three things: one, that the prison guard was created in the image of God. Two, that the prison guard was just doing his job. And three, he said that he realized if the roles had been reversed, and if he had lived in the same household, held the same beliefs, needed the same job to feed his own family, he probably would be doing the exact same thing. You see, what he was realizing was the art of compassion which closes the distance between us and makes us human again. Jew and gentile. Male and female. Oppressor and oppressed. Pharisee and tax collector.

The truth is we have no idea what it is like to live in someone else's shoes. Some of us have no idea what it is like to be an immigrant, or a disabled person, or a police officer, or a person of color in this country, Or an LGBTQ person in the church. That is, unless we've walked alongside someone who has, or at least made room to listen to what the experience has been like...without getting defensive.

Jesus says, nothing grows out of our contempt, whether it is justified or not. And perhaps even a mustard seed of compassion can lessen the gap between us, and soften a hardened heart. Maybe. Or maybe not. But then again: if the tables were turned and we lived their life instead of our own, can we honestly say that we would have chosen anything different?

The parable is so tricky because self-righteousness is such an easy trap to fall into. What is clear is that God's generous love is so much bigger than any of us can imagine. And compassion is the

soil in which God's love grows. So while we vote, and work toward justice, and keep telling our truth, we do so with humility and compassion. And with the eyes to realize that, regardless of how it appears, we aren't standing as far apart as we think we are.