

Luke 18:9-14 St Martin's Sunday 23 October 2016

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This parable, like the previous one, deals with prayer, but here the issue is the content of the heart as one prays. Luke seems to warn us against praying in a way that is not rooted in a real sense of who we are and in the ordinary grounded and messiness of our lives. It's a parable of contrasts and is unique to Luke. It contains common Lukan heroes and villains. The hero is the tax collector; the villain is the Pharisee. Humility is extolled as a virtue. It serves as a rebuke, as it's told to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. The Pharisees are the specific targets in Jesus' audience.

Most of us probably have an impression that Pharisees are the bad guys: stereotyped villains – hypocrites. That's not really true. Pharisees were highly respected – moral, religious people. This Pharisee was a religious leader. Educated, morally upright, faithful in worship, tithing more than was required.

Then Pharisees were forward progressive religious types. They tried to interpret and apply religious law to the modern needs and situations of the people. That's why, for example, Pharisees were open to the idea of resurrection and the Sadducees were not. The Sadducees were the conservative "stick to the Bible" group. If it wasn't in the Bible then it wasn't for them. They tried to follow the Scriptures exactly and literally. The Pharisees on the other hand tried to see the intent of the scriptures and apply that to modern times and situations. Familiar isn't it? Those groups have always been and probably always will be in the body of believers.

So – here we have a Pharisee. We all know someone like him. He's a pillar of the church – he tries really hard. He's active in community service, a solid religious person. And so when he stands and says "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." He wasn't lying, or covering up secret nasty deeds. Maybe he had sacrificed a great deal to be that way; to do what he thought would please God. And he was thankful for being able to live a life like that. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT? When does that start to spill over into self-righteousness? Would we know ourselves....if that started to happen to us?

We see immediately what is so dangerous about self-righteousness and pride. First, we come to trust in our own abilities rather than trusting God. Second, we come to regard other people with contempt and disrespect rather than seeing them as created equal in the image of God. However, we are reminded that God honours those who realise that their religious life does not commend them before God or make them superior; rather, we are all objects of his grace and mercy.

Then, there's the tax collector. Tax collectors were traitors to their own people generally despised. Often, they kept a cut for themselves out of the taxes they gathered. They were hated by nearly everyone. Decent people had nothing to do with them. Two men. One respected, godly, faithful and religious. The other despised, a traitor, probably a cheater and extortioner.

Their two prayers also make a contrast. The Pharisee is sure that he is a blessing to God: "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." Clearly, God's plan couldn't advance without this man's contribution. Here is trust in oneself. His real prayer is "God, I thank you that I am so marvellous." In his own "humble" eyes he is not unrighteous; fasting above and beyond the call of duty; tithing from everything. God need do nothing for him. He makes no request of God, he offers no honour to God. This religious man has done it all. After reading his prayer, we wonder whether God should apply to be his assistant!

In contrast, the tax collector senses that he approaches a holy God. He comes with timidity, from a distance, not lifting his eyes to heaven. While the Pharisee had stood right at the front and addressed God, the tax collector beats his breast in an obscure corner to reflect his remorse; indicating his awareness of his humble position before God.

The tax collector knows he is a sinner; the Pharisee is confident of his own righteousness. The contrast could not be greater. The tax collector asks for mercy. He desires to improve his spiritual health, not rest on any personal laurels. He is aware that the only way he has access to God is through divine mercy. Such access is not earned; it is the product of God's grace.

When Jesus evaluates the two prayers, only one petitioner went home justified. The tax collector's prayer honoured God and was heard, not so the Pharisee's.

To drive the point home, Jesus concludes, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This parable pushes us to ask ourselves who WE are; the Pharisee or the tax collector, and to realize that probably we are both. It asks us how we treat one another even when we behave in ways that are shocking and shameful.

And in the end it drives us back to the only place that we can stand for sure. The only solid ground amid the questions that can overwhelm us. And that is the absolute undeserved unimaginable love and grace of God. God who loves the Pharisee and loves the tax collector too. God who forgives the sin of the tax collector and forgives the sin of those who think they are better than that.

The grace of God is radical and shocking today as it was then. We do not, in the end, get what we deserve but rather we are welcomed and saved – made whole, by the absolute grace of God.

In prayer we do not lift ourselves above our fellow-men. We remember that we are one of a great army of sinning, suffering, sorrowing humanity, all kneeling before the throne of God's mercy. True prayer comes from setting our lives beside the life of God. Undoubtedly all that the Pharisee said was true. He did fast; he did diligently tithe; he was not as other men are; still less was he like that tax-collector. But the question is not, "Am I as good as my fellow-men?" The question is, "Am I as good as God?" It all depends with whom we compare ourselves. When we set our lives beside the life of Jesus and beside the holiness of God, all that is left for us to say is, "God be merciful to me--a sinner." In Jesus' name, Amen.