

WPC
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The Two Debtors
Psalm 17:3-5; Luke 18: 1-8; Luke 18:9-14

In chapter 18 of Luke's Gospel we find two parables about prayer that are told together: the first parable involves the "prayers of saints, the second the prayers of sinners".¹ In the first parable, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, Jesus is concerned with those who feel powerless, like the widow. He urges boldness and persistence in prayer. But, in the second parable, he warns against the danger of too much boldness, which can lead to arrogance and impudence.

Luke gives us the reason why Jesus tells the second parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector in v. 9: "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." The parable "conveys in story form the doctrine of God's justification of sinners and judgment on the efforts of those who try to establish their own righteousness. It is addressed to those who trust in themselves, thinking they are righteous, and who despise others."² When

¹ Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year C*, 456.

² Craddock, p. 456.

both parables are taken together, “the result is a healthy and balanced life of prayer, a balance that is both trustful and without hesitation.”³

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a parable of contrast. You could not find two people who were more polar opposites of one another.

The Pharisee movement in the first century was a highly respected lay movement (priests were the Sadducees). It had its roots in the Maccabean revolt against the Syrians around 168 BC, when they cleansed the temple after the Syrians desecrated it. Following that revolt the group of laity who struggled alongside the Maccabee brothers became disillusioned with the corruption that followed the successes of the revolt; hence, they became separatists and gradually became a formal movement. The word Pharisee originates literally from the word *separatists* in Hebrew. This movement was a major force in first century Jewish religious and political life and it should be no surprise to us that these devout men would be the ones who continually confronted Jesus with questions.⁴

In other words, the Pharisee is a very, very good man. He’s not a villain but rather represents complete dedication to observing the law of Moses. In fact, he even exceeds the law’s demands. His prayer is a

³ Earl Palmer, *Laughter in Heaven*, p. 120.

⁴ Palmer, p. 121.

common rabbinic expression of thanksgiving, much like the prayer found in Ps. 17:3-5. He's not a hollow hypocrite. Let's face it: this Pharisee would be welcomed with open arms into our church. He fasts twice a week (giving away the money saved to the poor) and gives a tenth of his income? Well, we need to get this fellow on our Session right away. He's the sort of respectable person all churches would welcome; he's not a villain.

Nor is the tax collector a hero. He's a crook, a traitor, a very, very bad man. In fact, as a tax collector working for Rome collecting taxes from his own people, he's a reprehensible character. He's resented as a betrayer of his society, someone who sold out the widows and the weak in favor of the powerful Romans who ruled their land. His prayer is similar to Psalm 51 - David's prayer for cleansing, healing, and moral renewal after his treachery towards Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba, because, frankly, he has a lot to feel guilty about. His life is offensive. To miss this fact is to rob the parable of its radical nature.

God justifies the ungodly, sinners who confess and rely on grace. That's the surprise of this parable.

What exactly did the Pharisee do wrong and the tax collector do right? I like the way Earl Palmer puts it: The Pharisee misses the chance to bring himself to the Lord. Instead he *describes* himself to the Lord. Here is a man

who shows God what God can see for himself. He misses a wonderful moment in which he could have simply brought himself into the generous presence of the Lord. In other words, he uses his faith to justify himself before God and before others

The tax collector does only one thing. He fearfully and timidly asks the Lord for help. He knows he's not a fine fellow; he knows he stands in need of grace, mercy and forgiveness. He asks for the Lord's love, not his applause.

The Pharisee leaves the temple unchanged and even more isolated than when he entered because he has religiously reinforced his lonely isolation during his time of "prayer." The second man is grateful for salvation, the wholeness that comes from God's love.⁵

So which one of these went home from the Temple, "justified" before God? "Not the fine fellow, sure of his virtue, but the wretched sinner who threw himself on God's mercy."⁶

It's important for us to recognize that the tax collector in this parable was praised not because he was a tax collector but because he was humble as he prayed and admitted that as a horrible sinner he needed the grace of God. The Pharisee was said not to have been fully justified, not because he was a

⁵ Palmer, p. 123.

⁶ Anthony Robinson, Weekly Reading, Oct. 18, 2010.

Pharisee but because in the parable he exalted himself – he was self-righteous. Fasting, tithing, and good ethical behavior are not rejected in this parable; neither is sinful behavior condoned.⁷

Who do we identify with in this parable? I’ve always been tempted to identify with the tax collector and not the Pharisee, even though I probably more closely resembled the Pharisee. I think the Pharisee may “resemble many more of us in many more ways than we would like to think, in the life of the church and in our society.”⁸ We in American society tend to justify ourselves, because the great American model of success is to become a “self-made” person. “Faith, on the other hand, is utterly reliant upon the grace and mercy of God, which we cannot manipulate, control or contain.”⁹

On the other hand, we want to be careful not to present the parable in such a way as to make the tax collector proud and thankful that he is not like others. It’s a challenge not to let our virtues become our vices, quite a challenge not to be smug in our goodness. “Nothing is gained if you leave this sanctuary thankful that you are not like the Pharisee.”¹⁰

Smug self-righteousness and contempt for others can take many different forms. Anthony Robinson says that someone recently spoke to him

⁷Lectionary Scripture Notes, Oct. 24, 2010.

⁸ Katie Huey, Just Worship, Oct. 24, 2010.

⁹ Robinson.

¹⁰ Craddock.

about how proud some churches seem to be of their “inclusivity.” Robinson thinks the danger is that these churches can start to think: “I thank thee God that I am inclusive, and not like other churches.”

You don’t even need to be in the church to act like the Pharisee. Years ago David Read preached a sermon in which he said that today’s “Pharisees” are not necessarily found within our churches. They are also found on the outside. They are those people who say, “God, I thank you that I may not be the very best person in the world, but at least I am better than all of those self-righteous hypocrites in the church.”

In *Aesop’s Fables* there is a story about a man who prays, “Lord God, please look with favor upon me and my wife and my children and upon no one else.”

Another man, overhearing that man’s prayer prays, “Lord, Lord, Almighty God, punish that fellow and his wife and his children and nobody else.”

In this story, there are mainly two types of prayers being offered and both are prayers that show contempt for the neighbor, even as we are trying to speak to the God who commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves!¹¹

¹¹ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Oct. 24, 2010, p. 19.

The good news is that our hope before God is that God does not look at us in the same way that we look at other people. The good news is that God looks at us in love, seeing all of us as brothers and sisters equally needing God's forgiveness and grace, in different ways. The good news is that our hope is not that we will get our act together and be as righteous as the Pharisee or as humble as the tax collector. Our hope is solely in Jesus, the one who told this parable. Thanks be to God. Amen.