

**The Pharisee and the Tax Collector**  
**Sermon for 10-24-10**  
**Scripture: Psalm 84 and Luke 18:9-14**

This parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is the basis for the first sermon I preached in Seminary back in 2001. At that time I gave it a title of: **WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU, BUT TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD**, and focused on humility. Now nine years later-- almost to the day--I have a different take on our Gospel lesson. Before I share my thoughts and interpretation with you, I want to ask you for a show of hands as to which character you most identify with. You have heard the Scripture read and probably most of you are quite familiar with it. How many of you see yourself as a Pharisee? As a Publican or tax collector? Unsure?

If we were to interpret this parable in a straightforward way, probably most of us would be thinking or saying something like this, "Thank goodness, Lord, that we are not like this Pharisee--hypocritical, self-righteous, overly pious. We come to church most every week and listen to the Bible and the preacher and know to be humble." So it is really tricky to listen for what God is telling us in this scripture and at the same time avoid the sin of pride ourselves. If we are not careful, we will end up sounding just like the Pharisee.

Let's take a look at these two stereotypical characters, both historically and symbolically in Jesus time. First we will look at the Pharisee. According to most scholars the word Pharisee comes from the Aramaic verb "parash" which means to separate. The Pharisees were those who believed their strict observance of the

Jewish Law separated them out from commoners.<sup>1</sup> They were not clergy or hierarchy but a school of laity. This Pharisee went above and beyond the required observances; e.g. he fasted twice a week although only needing to do so once a year on Yom Kippur; he paid a tithe on all he earned, although he was required to do so only on the first fruits of his agricultural crop. However, in our Gospels, Pharisees usually are in the role of those opposed to Jesus. They are seen as arrogant, rigid, legalistic, and certainly self-righteous. They went by the rules and were proud of who they were and what they did.

Some theologians compare the Pharisees to the “good elders, stewards or deacons”. They are the ones who do the work of the church and provide the financial support necessary to support religious institutions. Most of their faults were the result of over striving for holiness. “Their zeal was often misguided, but at least they had zeal in their desire to please God.”<sup>2</sup> The Pharisee in our Gospel trusts in himself. His prayer of gratitude may be addressed to God, yet it is really all about himself.

Now as we look at the tax collector (sometimes called Publican—a collector of public taxes) it’s easy to feel sympathy due to his humility, his pounding his chest, eyes downcast as he simply asks God for mercy. Yet remember who tax collectors were in those days. They were Jews hired by the Romans to collect taxes on commission. The more taxes they collected, the bigger their fee. The tax collector’s reputation was one of dishonesty; squeezing his fellow Jews for as

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<sup>1</sup> Latinoamerican Biblical Service: <http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/biblical/011028e.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Bailey, *The Lectionary Commentary*.

much as he could get in order to line his own pockets. Symbolically he is the worst of characters in the Gospels, one hated and distrusted. Somehow he must have really listened to Jesus' teaching about forgiveness and how God's love was for all.

I don't know about you, but I was drawn much more to the Publican than the Pharisee. I'm sure I would have said at my first attempts to interpret this Gospel lesson that I was more like him, more trusting in God. But wait a minute! Although I doubt if I have said, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people" as the Pharisee said in his opening prayer remarks, I certainly have said other things. Try on a few with me. "There but for the grace of God go I." Why should I have God's grace and the Other, the one on the margins, not have God's grace. Isn't God's grace for everyone? Here's another situation: Thinking about self-righteousness and rigid attitudes, many of us clergy as well as laity in mainline churches may accuse our fundamentalist brethren of being and having those attitudes and say to ourselves if not aloud, "Thank God I am not like those fundamentalists."

As I think more deeply about this parable, I see it as being about our attitudes both towards God and towards the "Other". First of all, I believe Jesus is commending an attitude of trust and dependence on God. This parable has to do with praying and comes right after the story of the unjust judge who finally granted justice to the persevering widow so she would leave him alone. (The preacher I heard last Sunday concluded that God was not the judge but the persevering woman, who will keep after us to know God and to be known, and

for us to be able to accept God's grace and love.) It's through prayer that we open our hearts and minds to God; it's through prayer that we can best have a relationship with God. It is through prayer that we learn about ourselves. One writer said prayer is not asking, but basking. It's time to let God know our needs even though God knows more about ourselves than we do. In our Psalm for today, the writer is filled with joy and yearning in prayer: "My soul longs, ..my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." And the Psalmist ends with, "O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you." The kind of centering that's possible through prayer can bring more gentleness and peacefulness as well as joy and trust into our relationship with God and with each other.

The separation between the two men praying in the Temple reminds me of how we ignore or prejudge others in our world. This parable reminds me of how the privileged class looks at the other, those of other races, classes, religions, and sexual orientations. It makes me think of how many Americans since 911 look at Muslims, especially those from the Middle East as possible terrorists and accept the propaganda we hear from the media on whichever side we are on. All of this is so difficult. It's such a tendency to fall into the trap of saying, "Thank God, I'm not like this Muslim, or Pharisee, or Fundamentalist or Democrat, or Republican." You can fill in the blank. One of my colleagues has been really struggling with this weeks' gospel. We know that not everyone is trying to be benevolent to others. He reflects that there are cases of pure evil. He says, "Here is my struggle, I know I certainly am not perfect but when terrible things happen how can we not say thank God I am not like that." He continues, "I

really want to see the face of Christ in others but sometimes, no matter how hard I try, it just seems impossible." I too struggle in not being analytical and judgmental when there are so many horrible things happening in our world, far and close at hand. I know many people, Christians and not, are feeling discouraged about the political scene we have been bombarded with over the last few months. I wonder how politicians would relate to Jesus saying that in the Kingdom of God that the first will be last and the last will be first or as he says at the ending of today's Gospel, "...all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." I guess it's pretty hard to be humble in a political campaign; however, some kindness and civility and truth could be possible. I wish I had more answers about all these things: about humility, about prayer, and about God's grace. Maybe I have said something that's been helpful in stimulating your thinking. One thing that I am sure about is that God loves us, every one. God loves me and God loves you with all our weaknesses and defects, all our idiosyncrasies and bad habits. God truly loves us just as we are.

My prayer is that we may not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. May God show us mercy; teach us that no one is "other", neither enemy nor stranger. Dearest Spirit teach us compassion and love for all as we walk humbly with you. Help us all to know deep down that you do indeed love us. May we love you more deeply. May we be open to your Spirit as we go about our life day by day. Thank you, Jesus. Amen