

## Sunday, October 23 – 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”

Scripture Reading: Luke 18:9-14

(The second reading for next Sunday will be Psalm 65.)

Note: Luke, as I mentioned previously, has a great deal to say about prayer, and in the scripture reading for this week we are back once again to the topic.

1. Vs. 1 – it is unusual for the gospel writer to introduce a parable by stating what was in the heart of the audience. Sometimes the parables were told to the crowds, or to scribes and Pharisees, or even to the disciples only. But here the parable is addressed to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” So, the question that occurs to me is this: is this parable really directed at everyone? In other words, is Luke really saying that this tendency lies in the heart of all? Why would Luke begin in this way?
2. Note the simple, easy-to-understand structure of this parable:

Two went up

    The Pharisee stood and prayed

    The tax collector stood and prayed

Two went down

Kenneth Bailey, a New Testament scholar who lived much of his life in the middle east, has argued that Jesus structures his teaching in this way (before recorders and cameras) so that the teaching is easily remembered. He has analyzed the structure of most – or all – of Jesus’ parables and has found similar, easy-to-understand (and easy-to-remember) structures. Interestingly, the punch line, so to speak, of this structure is usually in the middle – vs. 12 “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all my income.” Given the surprising conclusion of the parable – namely, that “the sinner” went home a righteous man – this statement in vs. 12 becomes all the more remarkable. Righteousness does not lie in outward actions.

3. I can’t resist pointing this out: In the English-speaking world, the word “prayers” almost always refers to private devotion. We use the word “worship” to refer to corporate worship – or the gathering of believers. It is important to see that in biblical writing, “pray” can refer to either. Acts 2:42 famously tells us that early Christians were engaged with the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. In that list, “prayers” refers to corporate worship. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector we are dealing with corporate worship in the temple, not private devotion. Jesus is talking to us about the right way (and the wrong way!) to worship God. Why make this distinction? Because the traditional interpretation is that the parable refers to private devotions.
4. Here’s an interesting insight, which has application for us: The Pharisee was not so much grateful **to** God as he was grateful only when he compared himself **to others**. Because the moment we begin to measure our lives against the lives of those around us, it doesn’t take long before the focus becomes what **we** do, how we act, what we perform. The shape of our lives, and the myriad of activities in which we engage that gives our lives that shape, becomes the taking-off point in our assessment of life. When you give thanks, is there ever an element of “compared to others”?

5. Here's another interesting insight – once again from Kenneth Bailey: Did the Pharisee stand “by himself” or did he in fact pray “to himself”? Apparently the Greek is vague here, leaving the possibility that the Pharisee was actually speaking mainly to himself. A bit of evidence in support of “to himself” is that this is frequently how Luke introduces parables – cf. 7:39, 12:17, 16:3, 18:4. On the other hand, the Pharisee had good reason to stand “by himself.” Any contact with someone like the tax collector would have rendered him ritually unclean, and he would have wanted to avoid that. Orthodox Jews today engage in much the same behavior, so that they do not sit on, ride in, or even lean on anything that might be unclean. What we should see, I suppose, is that however one interprets the Greek here, the issue is the disturbing aloofness of this person. There is something about his “standing apart” from others that Jesus draws attention to. What does this mean for us? I assume that Jesus is not upset with people who like to sit in the balcony, so what does he have in mind?
  
6. No discussion of this parable can fail to include “righteousness.” That subject underlies every sentence (and word) of the parable Jesus tells. And what he means to say is this: Righteousness is a gift of God granted by means of the atonement sacrifice to sinners who come to him in confession of their sin and in a full awareness of their own inability to achieve righteousness. That's my best attempt to summarize what we believe. How would you put it?