

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Psalm 65 and Luke 18:9-14

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Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Today we continue to make our way through Luke's gospel. We have been doing this since early in September, following Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem – story by story, miracle by miracle.

Each of the gospel writers – even though they tell essentially the same story – each of the gospel writers tells the story just a bit differently. Each one is writing with a different audience in mind.

And each gospel writer is introducing us to Jesus, hoping that we will respond, hoping that we will see in him someone we might want to follow, someone we might even want to give our lives to.

The gospels, as I hope you know, are not biographies. They don't even pretend to be biographies. They were written to make a claim about Jesus ... and then to provoke a response in us, a response of faith.

And so, I invite you to listen today with that in mind. Ask yourself: Is this someone I want to follow, is this someone I want to give my life to?

⁹ [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man [the tax collector!] 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.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we look to you for wisdom and insight, for guidance that will see us through our lives. We confess that what we really want is something that re-enforces what we already believe to be true. So, today, as we listen for your word to us, we pray that you will surprise us, that you will have an unexpected word for us, a word that forever changes us. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I've said before – as recently as last week, in fact – that Jesus was an exceptional story teller and apparently quite a charismatic speaker.

According to one scholar I read last week, you could make the case that he was put to death largely out of envy. He was so popular early on and so well-liked – people were so interested in what he had to say – that he was a threat to the political and religious leadership in Jerusalem.

The verses we heard today, I would say, are a good example of how Jesus worked. He begins by saying, **“Two men went up to the Temple to pray.”**

And with that briefest of introductions, we know pretty well what we’re going to get, and so we find ourselves drawn in – or set up. What we’re waiting for is the punch line to the story, and the more unexpected it is, the funnier it is going to be.

Except that Jesus, as you know, was not a stand-up comic. His punch-lines weren’t designed for laughs. In fact, his punch-lines, if you can even call them that, often left his audiences in stunned silence. The conclusions to his stories were so unexpected that his listeners had to think them over for a few seconds to make sure he said what they thought he said.

In the parable I just read, the Pharisee sounds a bit like a caricature. He’s not at all an attractive person. And Jesus, like any good story teller, seems to have fun describing him and his arrogant behavior. Two thousand years later we can still get a chuckle out of it.

But – and this is going to be the reason for the stunned silence at the end – for all of the Pharisee’s arrogance, for all of his self-righteousness, Jesus’ listeners still would have considered the Pharisee to be morally superior to the tax collector.

Jesus often had harsh words for Pharisees, but you had to give them this much: they were the keepers of the faith. They were the ones who kept the law of Moses. At one level, they were deeply admirable people.

And tax collectors, on the other hand, were the lowest of the low. They committed the one sin that has been unforgiveable in every culture in which it has ever occurred. Tax collectors collaborated with the foreign occupation. They even made a living out of it – and quite a good one at that.

So, in spite of the caricature, Jesus’ listeners knew from the first line who the good guy was – and also who the bad guy was.

But not so fast, Jesus says.

The one who leaves worship justified – or right with God – is the one who is not even allowed into the main sanctuary. The one who is justified is the one who is a traitor to his nation. The one who is justified before God is the one person in the story all of the people truly despised. And yet, because of his sincere repentance, he is the one who goes home in the grip of God’s grace.

“Think about *that*,” Jesus says. **“You think you know all about grace, and you don’t have the first clue about it. Your judgments about people are so utterly different from God’s judgments.”**

I want to say something this morning about the judgments we make about each other. Frankly, and I hesitate to say this, but I can’t think of a single area of Christian living that has been more widely misunderstood than this one. There may be others, of course, but this one just stands out.

There’s a perception – and it’s widespread – that people should not make judgments about each other. To be a faithful Christian, some of us think, means that we avoid making any judgments whatsoever.

And so, we tend to admire – don’t we? – people who are tolerant and easy-going and non-judgmental?

And doesn’t Jesus say, elsewhere in the gospels, **“Judge not that ye be not judged”**? People today can’t quote much scripture, but just about everyone seems to know those words. Judgment is bad.

The truth is, that particular quote has been lifted out of context and mangled beyond recognition. Of course we're called on to make judgments. Where did the notion ever come from that we're not supposed to make judgments about things? And even judgments about other people?

In just 15 or 16 days, all of the voters in the U.S. will be called upon to make judgments. U.S. citizens are going to be asked to choose between candidates and to come down on one side or another. And this is true in every country around the world where there is a representative democracy. It's our duty as citizens to make judgments.

I think that developing good judgment is one of the most important ways you get to be an adult. You choose – not just between right and wrong, but between what's good and what might be so much better. Those of us who are parents want our children to develop the capacity to make good judgments.

The next time someone says to you, **“Oh, you are so judgmental,”** you might want to respond with, **“Thank you, I've been working at this my whole life.”** Or maybe not. The point is that making judgments is not the problem.

The problem, as Jesus defines it for us in this parable, is *condemnation*. The problem is not that the Pharisee disapproves of the tax collector's behavior and his shaky political allegiance. He has every right to do that.

The problem – and this is what often feels so wrong to us – the problem is that the Pharisee *draws comparisons* between himself and this other fellow.

The Pharisee says – and it's not clear from the Greek whether he is speaking to himself or to God, although most translations tell us that this is directed to God – **“Thank you, God, that I am not like this poor soul who's not allowed to enter the main sanctuary for prayer. And I'm glad that I'm not like your run-of-the-mill thief, rogue, and adulterer. The truth is, I'm pleased with myself, and I trust that you are pleased with me too, O dear Lord.”**

Dallas Willard, until he died in 2013 was a philosophy professor at the University of Southern California in the U.S., has written a wonderful reflection on the Sermon on the Mount – called *The Divine Conspiracy*, and I recommend it to you, and it would be a terrific resource for your home group.

In the book Dallas Willard writes that what often happens to us, as we go through life, making our moral judgments, is that we don't stop there. Instead, what often happens is that we feel a need to prove our own righteousness by blaming or condemning other people.

And so, rather than being concerned about our own behavior, we tend to belittle the behavior of others, sometimes in a misguided attempt to **“straighten them out.”**

And Willard – I like this! – calls this the **“ministry of condemnation.”**

In the church today – and I think this is true in every church, certainly every church I have ever served – there are people who feel called to this ministry of condemnation or criticism.

And I must say, it's a highly specialized ministry. Fortunately, there are no ordination requirements. There are no classes to attend. There aren't even committee meetings to attend. And you don't need to be elected to this ministry at a congregational meeting. You simply appoint yourself.

The ministry of condemnation, as Willard describes it, almost always involves the close examination of what other people do and how other people spend their time and (I like this) what really motivates the behavior of other people within the church – because of course, if you're

called to the ministry of condemnation, then you know why other people behave the way they do. It's a special insight that God has given to you.

What Jesus is saying to us here is that blaming and condemnation and baseless assumptions about other people have no part in the kingdom of God – none whatsoever. And I would go so far as to say that this kind of behavior is destructive and it's a cancer on the community of faith. It's that serious. It needs to stop.

We live in disturbing times. I don't need to give you examples. Our world is polarized – and so is the Christian church. We haven't seen this much division in 500 years when people in this part of the world decided to break with the Catholic church.

And the question is, what has happened to us?

And what has happened to us – this is my sense – is that we've gone way beyond making good judgments and wise choices to belittling everyone around us who does not agree with our particular point of view.

By the way, you see this behavior on both sides of the political spectrum. This is not a conservative sin, just as it's not a liberal sin. This is human behavior in the 21st century, pretty much as it was in the first century.

Let me hasten to make this further point here.

The Bible is surprisingly specific about what we're to do when someone we know is behaving badly. And the implication is that there *are* certain kinds of behavior that we should not ignore or tolerate.

But the goal in addressing those behaviors, according to the Bible, is always **restoration**. If someone within the body is behaving badly, the goal is never, ever, to condemn that person. That's God's business, not ours.

So, our goal is always, in so far as it's possible, to restore that person to the community of faith.

If you see behavior in someone else that you cannot in good conscience approve, before you do anything, you need to do some careful examination of yourself.

I want to make these three points:

- **First**, you need to be absolutely sure that you're right. Your moral judgment needs to be thoroughly tested before you just go out and act on it. Most people I know who make good judgments, whose opinions about things I value, are very modest about those opinions. Haven't you found this to be true as well? They will say, "**Well, there may be something I do not know, a piece of information I do not have....**" That's modesty. So, just to repeat, the first thing to do is to be absolutely sure that you are right. The tax collector in the parable focused on his own behavior – and no one else's.
- **Second**, you need to ask yourself what sort of outcome you're hoping to achieve. In other words, before you express disapproval for someone else's behavior or actions, you need to know what you're hoping to accomplish. If the outcome you're looking to get is anything less than complete restoration – if your aim, for example, is to prove that you're right and good and decent and that the other person is wrong – then maybe you need to think a little more carefully about what you are trying to do. Only God has the power or the authority to write someone off. This sort of condemnation is not a part of the human job description. I for one don't want that particular responsibility, do you?

- I'll add one more. **Third**, if you see behavior in another person that you judge to be wrong, you need to respond as though the same thing could happen to you. Now, I know that you are all godly people, that you all make excellent choices with your lives, and that this will probably never happen. But let's say, for the sake of argument, hypothetically, that one day your life goes off track. Let's say you make a really poor, morally questionable choice with your life. And let's say, further, that someone – how should I put this? – expresses disapproval for your behavior. Someone feels called to tell you about what you have done. You would want that person, wouldn't you, to express disapproval in a way that loves you back into the community of faith? You would want to be respected as a human being. You would want to be taken seriously and treated like a child of God, which is what you are. Therefore, our faith tells us, be sure to treat others in that same way, as you yourself would want others to respond to you.

Imagine how our political process would change if candidates – I know I'm terribly naïve, but indulge this fantasy for a few seconds – imagine if political candidates would speak about others as they themselves would want someone else to speak about them.

Imagine how this church would be different, if we adopted that same sort of filter for our words – in other words, if before speaking we said, **“Is this the way I would someone else to speak to me and about me?”**

Imagine how our families, our marriages, would be different. Maybe we could begin to have conversations around the dinner table about the issues that matter most to us.

I started this morning by saying that the gospel writers wanted a response from us. They wanted us to be attracted to a new way of living. They wanted us to come to the end and say, **“Yes, I want to be his follower. I want to identify with him. I want to belong to him.”**

Whenever I read a story like this, I feel convicted. I am always that person in the story who gets it wrong. But then I feel something else. I remember that there is another way to live...

(Please listen to recording for end remarks.)