

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector
A Message on Luke 18:9-14
For Huntsville First United Methodist Church
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Luke 18:9-14 (NIV)

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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Today we continue our “Tell Me the Stories of Jesus” sermon series on the parables of Jesus by exploring a parable Jesus tells about someone who thinks he is better than others.

It reminds me of the story of a ticket agent working the desk at an airline terminal at an airport. As happens so often today some flights were canceled and she was working frantically trying to get passengers rebooked on other flights. The line was long and people were frustrated but the ticket agent was being nice and professional and it was having a positive effect on the line of passengers.

As she was helping a customer, a man in expensive clothing rudely pushed his way to the front of the line, slapped his ticket on the counter and said loudly, “I MUST be on the next flight and I HAVE to be in first class.”

The agent looked up at the man and said, “I’m sorry sir, but you will just have to wait your turn. Please go to the back of the line and be patient. We are working as fast as we can to get everyone rebooked to their destination.”

“No!” the man replied. “I am not moving until you get me a first-class seat on the next flight.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that, sir,” the clerk replied.

That really set the man off. Very loudly, so that everyone in the terminal could hear, he yelled at the clerk, “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHO I AM?”

The clerk smiled at the man, reached over and picked up the intercom microphone, and then said through the PA system. “Attention all passengers. There is a man at Gate 18 that does not know who he is. If anyone could help him find out who he is, please come to Gate 18.”

In the scripture today Jesus tells a parable that is similar to that joke: one person thinks that he is better than others. On the surface it seems rather simple, but underneath this parable goes really really deep theologically.

He casts the setting of the parable in the temple, which would have been in Jerusalem. This was a very holy place, the holiest place on earth, the place where the Jewish people believed that God resided on earth.

So both men go to the temple to pray. With the belief that God resided in the temple, you can imagine them having the concept of being so near physically to God that their prayers are turbo powered. It’s a local call, not long distance. (Those of you who remember the days before cell phones will understand that last statement.)

So while being so near to the presence of God these two men pray. This Pharisee was one of the top religious leaders at the time. They lived in the best houses, ate the best food, and were at the top of the social hierarchy.

The Pharisees even wore fancy robes with tassels at the bottom as required by Numbers 15:3-39: “...you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.” (Man. Maybe we should bring back tassels?)

But the Pharisees couldn’t have the same tassels as the unwashed masses, of course. Oh no. So instead of the normal three-inch tassels, they made theirs six-inches long. Yep. Longer is better when it comes to tassels, you know.

They also made their phylacteries bigger as well. These were small leather boxes containing tiny scrolls of Hebrew scripture that were worn on the arm or on their forehead as a reminder of

God's law. The Pharisee's were known to make their little boxes bigger boxes, just to show how religious they were. (After all, the bigger your phylactery the more religious you are, right? Oy vey...)

So that's how the Pharisee would have looked while praying in the temple.

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn't have a fancy robe or phylacteries. The tax collectors of the day were pretty much hated. The Jewish people thought of them as traitors because they collected taxes for the occupying Romans. Nobody likes paying taxes, but you sure don't like paying them to a military force occupying your country. So the tax collector was considered not only a sinner, but a traitor as well. They didn't have many friends, if any.

Note that Jesus says the Pharisee "stood by himself," while the tax collector "stood at a distance," or as *The Message* paraphrases it, "slumped in the shadows."

While the Pharisee stood loud and proud in the temple while praying, intentionally drawing attention to himself, the tax collector did the complete opposite and stayed in the background, trying NOT to draw attention to himself, with his "face in his hands, not daring to look up."

And let's look at how the contents of each man's prayer is dramatically different.

Here is the Pharisee's prayer as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*: "Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income."

Contrast that with the tax collector's prayer: "God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner."

Then Jesus finishes the parable with this statement: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Here's *The Message* paraphrase: "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

It is interesting how Luke bookends this parable. He starts with: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable..." And then he ends with this: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

This parable is about humility. It is about humbleness.

Humbleness is a very interesting thing. It's kind of like peripheral vision, you know the vision outside the center of your eye, the vision out of the corner of your eye.

If you see something in your peripheral vision, as soon as you focus on it, it is no longer in your peripheral vision!

I am at the age where I am getting "floaters" in my eyes. Now for you young folks who don't know what I'm talking about, "floaters" are caused when the jelly-like substance (vitreous) inside our eyes liquifies and contracts. What happens then is that little clumps of collagen fibers form in that liquified jelly stuff and create tiny shadows on the back of the eye, the retina. Those shadows are called "floaters."

And the weird thing about floaters is you can't focus on them. (At least I can't.) I can see them in my peripheral vision, but if I try to look directly at them, to focus on them, I can't. They move and appear somewhere else.

Likewise, if you are proud of being humble, then you are no longer humble. Humbleness comes from authentically and truthfully putting others first, not by putting others first with ulterior motives so that you look humble. Does that make sense?

I have a good preacher friend that I hold in high esteem. I have known him for years and he's not only a great pastor, but he's a great and funny friend as well. One year at annual conference a group of us pastors walked to a restaurant to eat. As we were entering the door of the restaurant I paused to let this friend go ahead of me, but instead he motioned for me to go through the door before him. "Please, go ahead," he said. "I'm more humble than you."

He was joking, of course, but that phrase has stuck with me because of the irony of it. I still get tickled by it! "I'm more humble than you."

As humans today part of our nature is to be competitive. Our world emphasizes winning, often at all costs. We have phrases such as "Second place is first loser." It's all about winning, even if we have to fudge the rules a little (or more than a little) or step on people in order to win. We're number one! We're number one!

But in the upside down and backwards world of following Jesus, we find in the scriptures that just the opposite is true. Our goal is not to be number one. We have to be willing to "lose" so that others will "win." That's what the scriptures tell us.

Our first scripture reading from 2 Chronicles today is just one example: "...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Here are some more:

Proverbs 3:34, "He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed."

Proverbs 11:2, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom"

Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves..."

1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

James 4:10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

And, of course, Jesus words from Luke's gospel that we read today: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

I think that's what Jesus means when he says in Matthew 20:16, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

But as Christians we often listen to the world instead of listening to Jesus. We become like a group of second graders lining up by pushing and jostling and cajoling our classmates in our attempt to be at the front of the line of Christianity.

We forget that there is no "front of the line" at the foot of the cross.

As Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-11, "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

As Christians, we are NOT to be like the man at the airport who loudly proclaimed, “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHO I AM?” We are to live our lives humbly so that our identity comes from being children of God and followers of Jesus Christ, swallowing our pride so that we may willingly serve others, not for recognition, but out of love.

We are to be humble like Jesus.

And that’s my challenge for you this week. Be humble. And don’t try to draw attention to your humbleness, because then you aren’t being humble. Be humble for humbleness’ sake. Be humble because it’s the right thing to do. Be humble because Jesus was humble. Think of others first. Be humble out of love.

Like that old Tim McGraw song says,

Don't take for granted the love this life gives you
When you get where you're goin', Don't forget. Turn back around
Help the next one in line
Always stay humble and kind

And unless you are joking, please don’t tell someone, “I’m more humble than you.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.