

“Two Prayers in the Temple”
Luke 18:9-14
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Rehoboth Beach, Delaware
September 6, 2020

This morning, let’s look at a parable of Jesus: the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, or, as we would say today, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Luke tells us that Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” (v. 9) But who were these Pharisees and tax collectors of whom Jesus spoke?

Let’s begin with those tax collectors. With a population of some thirty million, running the Roman Empire required not only a sizable bureaucracy; it also required farming out tax collection to private contractors. In the Roman province of Judaea Palestina, where Jesus lived, private individuals or groups secured from the Romans public contracts for collecting taxes. The way the system worked was like this: You secured your tax collecting contracts by paying upfront, out of your own pocket, all the taxes for a local area. Then, you had to go about collecting those taxes to reimburse yourself, often with the help of henchmen or strong-armed enforcers. The goal was to extract enough money or goods from the people to cover all the taxes you, as the collector, had already paid to the government. Then, you added in your own fees, in order to make a profit. You can see how this system easily became a corrupt racket, rife with extortion and profiteering. Not only were the people required to pay Roman taxes, but they were also required to pay the contractors who collected them. And, on top of that, they were paying these taxes for “the privilege” of living under military rule. The tax collectors, like Matthew and Zacchaeus, whom we meet in the Gospels, were all native Jews, as was Jesus, as were the Pharisees. But the Pharisees looked on these tax collectors as turncoats, as Roman

collaborators, as oppressors of their own people. Despite their unpopularity, tax collectors enjoyed huge financial incentives. In effect, these licensed contractors were given legal cover to rob their fellow Jews, despite the eighth Commandment: “Thou shalt not steal.”

Well, who were the Pharisees who detested these tax collectors? The Pharisees were a small sect within ancient Judaism. We must bear in mind that in Jesus’ day, as is true today, Judaism was not “one thing.” There were many “Judaisms.” As with later Christianity, so in Judaism, there’ve always been differing parties, perspectives, and factions. The Pharisees believed that the Commandments and Laws of God in the scriptures attributed to Moses should govern how Jews conducted themselves in their daily lives. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., during the Jewish revolt, the Pharisees survived. They survived because they had emphasized the centrality of the Scriptures, the Commandments of God, and the essential priesthood of all Jewish men. So they survived the otherwise catastrophic loss of the Temple, its sacrifices, and its priesthood. In this way, the Pharisees became the ancestors of modern rabbinic Judaism. We must also remember that the sharp debates between Jesus and the Pharisees were between fellow Jews. Jesus and the Pharisees actually agreed on many matters, including the resurrection of the dead. And, remember, too, that some Pharisees are singled out for high honor in the New Testament: Joseph of Arimathea is identified as both “a Pharisee” and a “disciple of Jesus.” There is also Nicodemus, who, with Joseph of Arimathea, prepared Jesus’ body for burial. Later, we also learn from the Book of Acts of Gamaliel, a learned Pharisee on the Jerusalem Council or Sanhedrin who stuck up for Peter and the apostles and secured their release after their arrest by the Temple police. And,

remember, the Apostle Paul had also been a practicing Pharisee before his encounter with the Risen Lord.

Well, with this background in mind, let's return to the Temple where we find both our Pharisee and our tax collector. Both had gone up to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." There is actually much in this two-sentence prayer that is admirable. The three ancient disciplines of Jewish and Christian practice are all impressively here: Prayer, fasting, and alms giving. This Pharisee is no hypocrite. Unlike others whom Jesus calls out in Matthew, chapter six, he is not "heaping up empty phrases" thinking he "will be heard because of his many words." (v. 7). His prayer or psalm of thanksgiving is short and to the point. This Pharisee is not parading his piety in front of other people. On the contrary, he *thanks God* that he is not like other people. Our Pharisee is not seeking any recognition or any honor from anyone, except from God. True, our Pharisee names his own impressive virtues. But he gives thanks *to God* that he has them. He wants *God's* recognition of his righteousness. He comes to the Temple not to impress *anybody*, but to stand honorably in prayer before God alone. And why not? Is he not doing justice? He's apparently keeping all the Ten Commandments--and more. He regularly fasts, and he consistently tithes. So, he's not only doing the right thing, but he's also demonstrating his compassion through his financial giving, some of which, no doubt, went to the poor. Honestly, isn't this the kind of church member that today's congregations would gladly welcome? Let's sign this guy up. We could use him!

What about the publican or tax collector? His prayer in the Temple is also addressed to God. The tax collector is praying to the same God as the Pharisee, the God of Israel, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The tax collector's prayer, like that of the Pharisee, is not "heaping up empty phrases." Like the Pharisee, he, too, is not thinking he would "be heard because of his many words." In fact, the tax collector's prayer is even briefer than the short prayer of the Pharisee. It's just seven words: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Like the Pharisee, the tax collector, too, does not come to the Temple to impress anybody else who might be there. In fact, we're told he's standing far off, perhaps hoping no one will even see him. But he's not looking up, and he's not looking sidewise; apparently, he's only looking down. His prayer of confession, reflects the 51st Psalm, "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (v. 17) Like the Pharisee, our tax collector is also no hypocrite. He has no virtues to offer God. True, he doesn't name his specific sins one by one. True, he may be hiding in shame in the Temple. But he does not hide from God what he is: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Two prayers in the Temple. Both offered to the God of Israel. Both sincere. Both honest. Both offered simply and briefly. Both offered without parading piety before others. Both offered without hypocrisy. God evidently heard both of these prayers. But Jesus tells us that only the tax collector goes back "down to his home justified;" only the tax collector leaves the Temple "right with God." Why is that? Well, Luke, who collected this parable of Jesus and put it in his Gospel, gives us the answer by the way he introduces the parable: "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

Our Pharisee has no time for “thieves, rogues, and adulterers.” Apparently, sneaking a sideways glance, we learn he has no respect for “this tax collector,” his co-religionist in the Temple. How did the Pharisee know that the other man praying in the Temple was a tax collector? I doubt if the tax collector wore a sign around his neck. I doubt if he were “in sackcloth and ashes.” Perhaps, he was well dressed. Perhaps, the Pharisee had seen this tax collector in his neighborhood. Perhaps, the Pharisee had even been the victim of his extortion. But the parable just doesn’t say how the Pharisee knew this other man in the Temple was a tax collector. But he knows that he was, and, so he assumes that the tax collector must be a terrible sinner, if not an outright thief or a rogue. Ironically, the tax collector doesn’t disagree with that judgment. For he himself prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” But our Pharisee doesn’t see sinners as real people like himself. He only sees them as moral failures worthy of his contempt.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter: By thanking God that he was not a moral failure like others, our Pharisee reveals that he was among those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” (18:1) He had no doubts whatsoever that he could make himself righteous and present himself as worthy to stand before God. He certainly had been working hard at it, devoting his life to obeying the commands of God. And now he comes to the Temple. He has prepared for God an oral report on his good-faith efforts. The Pharisee updates God by rattling off his successes and by reminding God of all the sacrifices he’s making in order to live a virtuous and upright life. So, he comes up to the Temple prepared to pray. He arrives ready: full of virtue, full of piety, full of good works, full of thanksgiving—*and full of himself!* He comes to impress upon God that he is still worthy of God’s approval. He seems to think God is like a

distant boss to whom he reports periodically up at the home office: “God, please know all is well. There’s no need for undue concern.” In this way, he keeps God at arm’s length. In fact, he doesn’t seem to need anything from God: “Everything is in order, Lord, at least with me; and, if I may say so, not like most others.” So, the Pharisee in our story leaves the Temple as he arrived: trusting in himself, his virtue, his piety, his good works, and still certain that he remains in good standing with his boss. *And he also leaves the Temple with contempt for those he is sure are not right with God.*

This parable of Jesus is teaching his disciples once more about prayer. For Jesus, true prayer is not boasting before God. True prayer is not thanking God that we are not like others. Instead, Jesus taught, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” True prayer is not coming to God to report on our successful sacrifices on God’s behalf, as if to put God in *our* debt! True prayer is actually to *sacrifice* any notion that we have any claim on God’s approval, or any claim that God owes us something. Only those who know they have nothing in themselves to offer God, return from the house of the Lord justified by the grace of God, whatever our virtues, and whatever our sins. True prayer comes before God utterly empty; it comes with hands and hearts opened to receive whatever *God* knows we need. As the Psalmist declares, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your Name give glory.” (Ps. 115:1) The old gospel hymn, “Rock of Ages,” puts it this way:

“Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's commands;” And, again,

“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”

As Luther said on his deathbed with his very last breath, “We are beggars. This is true.”

Well, it's time to leave Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. But we would miss the whole point of it, if we were to leave this service saying, "Thank you, Jesus, that I am not like that Pharisee in your parable--and all the other self-righteous people I know." It's no secret that today we live in the age of the "put-down," when the rhetoric of contempt for others dominates the air waves and fills the screens of our televisions, computers, and I-Phones. But if we truly take Jesus' parable to heart, we can't play that game anymore. We can't regard with contempt those who appear to us as utterly sinful *or* as utterly self-righteous. We would miss the whole point of this Jesus' parable, if we leave worship today confirmed in our contempt for *anyone*. On the contrary, we Christians always stand before God in sinful solidarity with both the Tax Collector *and* the Pharisee. And so we never outgrow our need for God's mercy: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors!" The good news is that the gracious embrace of our Lord Jesus Christ reaches farther than the sin of Adam. So, in the light of God's amazing grace, and in the power of "the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died," we, too, can say, "my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt"--not on others--but "on all my pride." "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" And Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to home justified." Thanks be to God!

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