



“Self-Congratulations”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
October 24, 2010
Luke 18:9-14

Generally, when we hear a story, we identify with one of the story’s characters. So, in today’s parable, who would you rather be: the Pharisee or the tax collector? Most of us will immediately shun the arrogant Pharisee and gravitate to the humble tax collector. Yet, if we do, we dodge the punch of the parable.

The problem is that the story has been yanked from its original context. If you have been around the church very long, you have likely been taught that Pharisees were pompous hypocrites who were the enemies of Jesus. In fact, many modern dictionaries list as a definition of a Pharisee, “a self-righteous person; a hypocrite.” On the other hand, you may have heard that tax collectors were humble and penitent people who were unjustly cast to the margins of society.

However, when Jesus first told this parable, those were not the images conjured up in the hearers’ minds. In the time of Jesus, Pharisees, more than anyone else, lived strictly according to the commandments. They were a very self-disciplined bunch who held themselves to the highest standards.

Have you ever known a young person who is a graduate of one of our nation’s military academies? They have very high ethical standards. They believe in honesty and moral integrity. They are trustworthy and dependable. They are concerned about right and wrong, and they honor the principles on which our nation was founded.

The Pharisees were much like that. Most people were in awe of their high moral caliber. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were not humble, penitent, misunderstood people. They were traitors who collaborated with the despised Romans who were occupying Jewish land. Tax collectors were responsible for collecting taxes from the people in their district and turning the money over to Rome. Any amount they collected that exceeded the Romans prescribed amount, was theirs to keep. As a result, most tax collectors were far better off than the average person, because they squeezed as much money out of the local populace as possible. They built a reputation as unscrupulous leeches for their dishonest practices and for aiding the enemy.

Thus, when Jesus told this parable, the anticipated hero of the story would have been the Pharisee, while the villain would have been the tax collector. When Jesus declared that the tax collector was justified rather than the Pharisee, the people would have squirmed, and probably been outraged.

However, if we look closely at the details of the story, we understand why Jesus reached his surprising conclusion. Look at the Pharisee's prayer. He does not confess sin, he does not thank God for the essentials of life and he does not pray a prayer of petition - either asking for help or praying for others. In fact, his words are not really a prayer at all. He attempts to mask a self-promoting speech in the guise of prayer, but in fact, it is nothing more than a first century version of an attack ad.

Like the political commercials that are filled with spurious claims to shred an opponent's character, the Pharisee seeks to raise his own personal stock by denigrating others. He says, "God, I thank you that I am nothing like these other dregs, especially not that tax and spend liberal," oops, I mean, "tax collector."

The Pharisee abstains from praying a prayer of confession because in his mind he has nothing to confess. So, after sharing his opinion on the unrighteous, he launches into his campaign speech naming his own breath-taking accomplishments. He declares – in a voice loud enough to be heard by others standing in the temple – I fast *twice* a week and I contribute a tenth of *all* my income."

To fully appreciate the Pharisee's boast it is helpful to know the degree to which he has exceeded expectations. According to Middle East scholar, Ken Bailey, "The written law only required fasting on the annual Day of Atonement. The Pharisees, however, chose to fast two days before and after each of the three major feasts. That meant thirteen days a year. But this man announces to God and everyone within earshot, that he...fasts two days every week."¹ Not once a year, not 13 times a year, but over 100 times a year. No chubby tubby here. This was a very thin Pharisee.

In addition, Jews were commanded to tithe on most of their income, but there were a number of exceptions. The Pharisee in this parable claimed none of the exceptions and tithed on all of his income.² Considering that average Presbyterians gives about two percent of their income to the church, believe me, any pastor would love to have 10 such Pharisees in his/her congregation. Especially during these tough economic times.

Turning to the tax collector, we do not find a model of virtue we would recommend to our young people. However, we do see someone who knows how to pray. He achieves something many people are unable to do. He looks into the mirror and sees an undistorted reflection. It isn't pretty. He sees a man who is failing to live the life God desires of him so he throws himself on the mercy of God, praying, "Forgive me. I am a sinner." Then, Jesus delivers the punch line: "This tax collector, not the other, went home right with God."

Note that the Pharisee does not receive a harsh judgment. In fact, he is not even aware that he has been judged and found lacking. He marches out of the Temple with his head held high because he is under the impression that he has shown himself to be a stellar example of God-centered living. He probably imagines others saying, "If only I could be as good and faithful as he is!"

Some may leap to the conclusion that since this man is out of harmony with God, then being faithful does not entail making a sacrificial gift of our wealth, praying, fasting and living according to the commandments. They would be very wrong. Jesus does not condemn the man for his actions, which are impressive, but rather for his attitude. He is condemned for believing that he is better and more deserving than others; and chiefly, for comparing himself to others.

If we are completely honest with ourselves, many of us could easily slip into the sandals of this Pharisee. We look around at others who are self-absorbed, whose idea of communing with God is being out on the golf course or in the garden on Sunday morning, who want the church to be there for them in times of need but do not give any financial support, who are less than honest in their business practices, who are unfaithful in their relationships, and who neglect the needs of the poor, and compared to them we are paragons of virtue.

However, there are hazards in comparing ourselves to others. It can easily lead us to have contempt for other people. This is precisely what happened to the Pharisee. He prayed, "God, I thank you I am not like those people."

He sought to build himself up by tearing others down. But having contempt for others destroys our relationships. Jesus calls on us to love each other and if we are constantly whipping out a magnifying glass to inspect one another for flaws, it poisons our relationships.

Comparing ourselves to others can be very isolating. Who is more difficult to be around than the one who believes he lives a near flawless life? If we routinely strive to show others how good we are, we will end up very lonely.

Rather than comparing ourselves to others, God wants us to take an honest look at ourselves in relation to the person God wants us to become. That one shift in our view makes all the difference. When we compare ourselves to others, we devise arguments to defend all sorts of behavior. But, when we compare ourselves with the person we could become, we see the gap.

We admit that we could do a better job of controlling our temper, we could be more comforting to people who suffer, we could do more to help the hungry and the homeless, we could focus on reconciling broken relationships, we could take better care of God's creation, we could be better advocates for justice and peace. Comparing who I am with who God wants me to become leads to honest confession. It enables us to pray the prayer of the tax collector: "God, forgive me for my sin."

Once he threw himself on God's mercy, the tax collector experienced the liberating power of forgiveness. After he came clean with what was wrong in his life, he could become a changed man. He did not have to keep treading a path that was harming others and destroying his own

soul. With God's forgiveness came new possibilities for living. Anyone who has gone through a 12 step program understands the power of forgiveness and the thrill of a second chance.

John Ortberg shares what happened at his daughter's graduation from college. His wife "was the commencement speaker, so before the ceremony, they gathered with a group of faculty, alumni and administrators. Just moments before the processional, the university president pulled three seniors into the center of the room and told everyone that they were going to be serving people in impoverished areas after graduation. Then he faced the three students, and said, 'Somebody you do not know has heard about what you're doing. He wants you to be able to serve without any impediment, so he is giving you a gift.' Then he stepped in front of the first student, looked her in the eyes and said, 'You have been forgiven your school debt of \$105,000.'"

"It took a few moments for the words to sink in. The student shook her head and began to cry. The president turned to the next student. 'You have been forgiven your debt of \$70,000.' Then to the third student, 'You have been forgiven your debt of \$130,000.'"

"All three students were trembling. Their lives had been changed in an instant by the extravagance of someone they had never met. For those who watched, it was as if they had experienced the forgiveness themselves. There was not a dry eye in the room."

"An enormous debt. An unseen giver. An unforgettable gift. They were now free to become a blessing to the world."²

When we face our failings, God forgives us and transforms us so that we can move beyond passive self-satisfaction to the new adventures God wants us to explore. We are freed from our failings, so that we can become a blessing to the world.

NOTES

1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, (Downers Grove Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), p.348.
2. John Ortberg, "Living By the Word," in *Christian Century*, December 15, 2009, p.21.