

Luke 18:9–14 (NET)

Jesus also told this parable to some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: extortionists, unrighteous people, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’ The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!’ I tell you that this man went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but they who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Fulness Thereof

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 27, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

The poor old Pharisees, they take it on the chin in the Gospels. They seem to be self-righteous, conceited big shots whose only duty in life is to fuss at people over the endless rules of the Torah, the Law—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They grump at those who do not observe the law. They are the Torah cops.

This morning's story follows the pattern. Jesus tells a parable. He holds a Pharisee at one hand who prays by bragging how good he is and then pointing to the tax collector and giving thanks that he, the Pharisee, is not like this tax collector. This maligned tax collector, at Jesus' other hand, whom the Pharisee is glad he isn't like, prays for mercy and forgiveness for his many sins. Jesus says point blankly that it is this penitent tax collector who is right with God, not the Pharisee.

Now, this is a scandal. Because we have come to see the Pharisees as the bad guys in the Gospels, we may miss just how much a scandal it is. Jesus and his audience were all Jews, of course. The Pharisees were among the most respected people in Jesus' day. They represented the height of Jewish religious observance according to the New Testament and to the historian Josephus. The tax collectors, on the other hand, were seen by many Jews as traitors, collecting, as they did, taxes for the empire. Jesus' little story was a scandal. It inverted things. The ones everyone thought were the best were, in his story, the worst. And the scum of the society were, in Jesus' telling of it, right with God. Jesus has reversed the normal social pecking order. He does it all the time. The first shall be last, as he once said.

For the last couple thousand years many readers of the New Testament have retold this story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Over and over they have retold the story. And they've developed a story about the story, too. The story about the story goes like this. The Pharisees represent the old religion, the Old Testament, if you will. The old religion was rigid and legalistic. It had no heart. It was largely a bunch, hundreds, of arcane rules. The leaders of the old religion beat up on people who failed to live up to all the rules. Then Jesus came along with an alternative. Jesus came along with the religion of love and heart. Jesus overturned the religion of rigidity and hypocrisy and nastiness. He offered his followers a new faith. For his trouble the leaders of the old faith crucified him. But God was with Jesus. He rose from the dead, proving he was right about everything.

James Carroll's book *Constantine's Sword* chronicles the devastating impact of this story throughout the course of western history. From the Crusades to the Holocaust, from the ghettos of Prague to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, the Jew has paid the price for the Pharisee's ancient arrogance.

The sad irony is this. This story Christianity has too often told of Jesus' story is not the story Jesus told. It's not what he meant his hearers to hear. The sordid story of how it all got so far off-track is a longer and more complicated tale than we can tell today. But what we can tell today is a more accurate rendition of the story Jesus meant to tell. It will look quite different.

The first thing to notice in the story is that Jesus is speaking to his followers. Wow! Let's not miss that. In the previous chapter Jesus begins telling a set of stories for his disciples. Today's story is one of them. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and in this story he is speaking especially "to some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else." He's talking to his disciples, some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else. Well that's kick in the pants. Some of Jesus' own disciples were already puffed up with self-righteousness and looking down their noses at other people. Maybe they looked down their noses at some of the other disciples, or maybe at some in the crowd that gathered around Jesus. Either way, Jesus has got a problem in his own house. And he knows just how corrosive this arrogant, looking-down-your-nose thing can be. So, as he often does, he tells them a story.

There was this Pharisee. This Pharisee thought too much of himself. He was praying about how glad he felt that he was right with God, especially in comparison to that scum bag tax collector over there.

Who was this Pharisee that Jesus was speaking about? Not this particular one. But who were the Pharisees? The answer is complicated. But one main thing the Pharisees were known for was saying that the Jewish Law was for everybody to follow, not just the priests. The Pharisees said the religion was for the people to follow. They said you couldn't just leave it to the priests. The Pharisees said the Temple was not enough. You had to do more than bring the priests some animals and money to support the Temple and its sacrifices. Sounds just like we thought, right?

But here's where it gets interesting. What was following the Jewish Law all about?

Listen to what the Law itself says on the topic.

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to revere the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ((Deuteronomy 10:12–13 (NRSV))

And another:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (NRSV))

The law according to Deuteronomy can be simply stated. It is to revere God, to love God with all you heart, mind and soul. In Leviticus it adds, love your neighbor as yourself. As you recall, this is exactly what Jesus quoted when asked what a person was required to do. Everything else derives from these, he said. All of the rest of the commandments are simply to guide the people toward loving God and their neighbors. The commandments are not a heavy burden of a million arcane rules; they are the way to life and wellbeing.

These basic commandments are so important for life to be lived well that God tells the people: Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

To this day this scripture is among the most recited prayers by Jews everywhere, the Shema. *Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*. Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And on it goes. From early times observant Jews affixed Mezuzahs to their doorposts. [Slide] The Mezuzah cases are often ornate. Inside is a small scroll with the prescribed verses of the Shema penned by a trained scribe. People will often touch the Mezuzah on leaving or entering their homes to be reminded of these basic commandments to revere and love God.

Now, it's easy enough to see why God wanted the people to keep being reminded about these commandments. It takes about five seconds for us human beings to forget them. God says that things will go well for us if we keep our focus on revering and loving God. But we just can't seem to get over putting ourselves in the center of things instead. It becomes all about us rather than all about God. Today Jesus was addressing among his disciples "some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else." He tells a story about a Pharisee who thinks the same way. In another place Jesus' disciples James and John ask Jesus if they can sit at his right and left hand in the kingdom of God. Like the Pharisee in the story, they're supposed to be fixed on loving God and their neighbors. Instead James and John are fixed trying to get a luxury box for themselves in heaven.

We get so mixed up reading these stories about the Pharisees. We think Jesus is saying that they're the bad guys, and we're the good guys. We trap ourselves into thinking that the Pharisees are these rigid legalists with no heart that self-righteously think they are better than everyone else, but we aren't. The trap springs. We say, thank God we Christians are not like those Pharisees. Thank God we are not like the Jews. Thank God we have accepted Jesus unlike those others over there. I say, thank God Jesus rose, or he would be turning in his grave.

When Jesus told this story of the Pharisee he was saying something quite the opposite from what we often think. He was saying something like this:

Let me tell you a story. There was a Pharisee. You all know who the Pharisees are. They are the ones who helped democratize the Law. They're the ones who understood that each and every person could and should love God with all their hearts, minds and souls. They are the ones who said that if revering and loving God were truly written on everything from your heart to your hands to your doorposts, the world would be a different and better place. They understood that loving and revering God would lead to true happiness and fulfillment, to true kindness and justice. Jesus said, These guys got understand things better than anybody. They get it right. They are the best of the best.

But hear, O Israel, even a Pharisee can betray the very thing he knows and loves the best. Even a Pharisee can slip into putting himself at the center of things rather than God. Even a Pharisee can fool himself into thinking that his self-righteousness is real righteousness. And so this Pharisee was praying: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: extortionists, unrighteous people, adulterers—or even like this tax collector." And how bad a mistake did the Pharisee make? How big a problem is it when he prays like that?

Well, I tell you how bad, says Jesus. That tax collector guy the Pharisee was talking about, we all know what they're like. He's scum, right? Well let's listen to his prayer. He stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!" By my lights, Jesus said, that guy's better off than that best of the best guy over there.

Now, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the Pharisees, said Jesus. But what I am saying is this. I'm saying that if one of them can get it mixed up, I suppose some of you can, too.

I imagine that those disciples and other followers that Jesus was talking to, those "who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else," felt pretty uneasy when he looked them in the eyes. I know I'm uneasy when I imagine him looking me in the eye.

But I don't suppose Jesus' ultimate purpose was to embarrass his followers. His purpose was to help them see their own self-destructive tendencies. It was to help them let go of their self-aggrandizing, self-centered ways, to put God in the center instead, and thereby to know the fullness of living in the light of God. For, as the great old Psalm says it:

The earth *is* the LORD's, and the fulness thereof;

The world, and they that dwell therein.

For he hath founded it upon the seas,

And established it upon the floods.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD?

Or who shall stand in his holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart;

Who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity,

Nor sworn deceitfully.

He shall receive the blessing from the LORD,

And righteousness from the God of his salvation.

This *is* the generation of them that seek him,

That seek thy face, O Jacob.

Come, good friends. For the earth *is* the LORD's, and so is the fulness thereof. Amen.