

"A Sinner!"

October 27, 2013

Luke 18:9-14

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "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.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Bullying is so prevalent in our news today. We hear of countless stories of bullying going too far. The youth are bullied to the point they have nowhere to turn but to take their own lives. We tend not to think too much about bullying until it makes the news and some kid has taken his or her own life because they were bullied. I mean it took me a while to realize that one Chrysler van commercial that was out a year or so ago and showed a boy and some other boys racing to get to the first boys home after school is let out. He runs the fastest and jumps in the automatically opening back of the van and then he is safe from the other guys and even sticks his tongue out at them as he smoothly drives on because he had beaten them at their own game.

I am sure we have all been on both sides of the bullying debate. We have all probably been bullied in some way shape or form or perhaps we have even been the bully. A lot of debate has been going on to the reason for bullying being so prevalent in schools of late and all the psychological reasons kids are or are not bullies and who is the victim etc. Well, when we consider today's scriptures we are talking and hearing about the core essence of why people bully, they are looking down on another person and think that they elevate themselves by putting another person down.

Is not this in essence what the parable in Luke is about today? It is about a very religious, self-righteous person who looked at others with contempt. In his disdain for those he considered unworthy, he had become a kind of *spiritual* bully.

There is a contrast in the story between two powerfully charged spiritual concepts. The one is humility and the other hubris. Hubris is one of those funs theological terms that I find fun to say and means "an exaggerated or inflated sense of self-importance." ¹ It is not the same as pride. (There is the good sense of proud, like -- "Mommy is so proud of you" -- to a child with the intent of building a proper sense of esteem for one's self). But hubris might best be understood as "deadly spiritual pride".

Humility, however, is a realistic assessment of who I am.... more specifically who I am in *the eyes of God!* "*In the eyes of God.*" Not in my own eyes, or my parent's eyes, my spouses, my children's or my friends, but, in God's eyes.

Ask the question. Try it out...

Who am I... in God's eyes?

Is not that a humility inducing question? Of all the qualities we have this one is at the heart of Christian living. The beginning of an authentic spiritual life is to connect with who we are in the eyes of God. The remainder (or the journey) of Christian living is to stay in touch with who we can become with the help of God.

Humility is the foundation of spiritual vitality. Hubris lies at the center of spiritual deadness.

We gain from this parable a couple interesting perspectives of understanding who we are in the light of God, the person we are in God's eyes. We can see that Luke's language suggests the Pharisee was not so much praying to God as he was talking to himself about himself! He was so filled with himself he could not do otherwise.

Have you ever noticed that about some people? When they talk, it is not so much conversation with you or your group it is just another opportunity to tell you how great they are or what a wonderfully intelligent child they have. If you were to later quiz them about what others said during the time you were together, they would not have the foggiest idea. When you are filled with self, there is no room for others including God!

The Pharisee is filled with himself. He begins his conversation with himself -- (he is not aware that he is not actually praying) -- by looking at how terrible other people are. He is not a thief or a crook. In fact he is not even like... *"...this tax collector"*. The Pharisee is trapped in the old "I'm not as bad as" syndrome. He considers himself good because he sees others as bad. "I am a good guy," he reasons, "because of all the bad guys I see." Not only that I attend church every week, I tithe my income down to my bingo winnings and I serve on committees even when I'd rather not. The fellow is filled with self. He is, Jesus says, that he is praying "to himself" or "with himself". The tragedy of the Pharisee's prayer is that the thing he values most and counts on most for his relationship with God namely his religiosity is the thing that cuts him off from God. He is proud of that which is his undoing. The eyes of the Pharisee are looking around at others for the flaws and upward to heaven for congratulations, that he is not the same. He is the quintessential bully who elevates himself by putting another down.

We then in contrast have the tax collector. Praying with head bowed and claiming his sin. He is humble and only praying about himself and for himself because he recognizes that he cannot judge others actions only his own. Unable to offer anything of his own righteousness, he can only throw himself on the mercy of God and thus finds the shortest distance between hopelessness and salvation the grace of God.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who came to the gates of heaven to be greeted by St. Peter. Peter asks the man if he can give a brief history of his life with an emphasis on the good deeds he had done in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven. "You will need 1000 points to be admitted," Peter tells the man.

"This will be a cinch," the man thinks to himself, "I've been involved in church from the days of my youth." Then he begins to list his activities for Peter. He was an officer in his youth group, served in every possible position he could as a youngster. Was on the Church Council and every committee the church had to offer. His list was extensive.

"Very impressive," Peter smiles at the man. An angel standing with them also smiled and nodded as he tallied the points and then whispered in Peter's ear. Peter tells the man, "This is quite striking -- we seldom see men of your very good works. You will be pleased to know that you have 327 points! Is there anything else you can think of?"

The poor soul breaks into a cold sweat and begins to reach deep for every single act of kindness he could think of. He listed them as the angel scratched furiously on his angelic clip board and nodded his head in admiration. Peter looks at the clip board and says, "This is quite exceptional! You now have a total of 402 points. Can you think of anything else?"

The distressed guy strives to recall good deeds -- like the time he helped a little old lady across the street. He finally arrives at a grand total of 431 points and cries out... "I am sunk! There is no hope for me! What more could I have done? O Lord, all I can do is beg for your mercy!"

"THAT," exclaims Peter, "Is a thousand points!"

So also, the tax collector in Jesus' parable finds his hope in the grace and mercy of God.

There is something we need to understand about this story Jesus told.

The tax collector is not a nice guy. It is hard for us twentieth century people to understand the impact of the parable. It is as though your neighbor was an IRS agent who came to you and said, "*I happen to know you won \$1000 in the lottery and didn't turn it in as income. Unless you give me a hundred dollars, I'm going to get you audited.*" These New Testament tax collectors were Jews who took positions as workers for the Roman tax system. They collected taxes and whatever else they could squeeze out of their victims.

On the other hand, the Pharisee of the New Testament has frequently received a bad rap. Actually, Pharisees would make great neighbors. They would certainly not cause your property values to drop. They were moral, upstanding, very religious people who felt it necessary to separate them from the sinful world around them.²

The parable is a radical statement about the nature of grace. It is hard for people who depend on their own goodness to gain God's approval to hear. To depend 100% on the grace of God is to admit that I bring nothing that impresses God to the extent that I have earned God's favor and God's life! There is never a time when I could come out on the good side of going to God and demanding, "I want what's coming to me!"

In the eyes of God, the tax collector returns to his home with the grace of God as his hope. The Pharisee heads home with the same old attitude ready for another week of collecting "points." Amen.