

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”¹

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Can We Fail to Manipulate God?

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Text: *Luke 18:9-14*

Frederick Buechner says that much of what passes for religion is wishful thinking. He says that is especially true of the hell part, for when people get talking about hell, they want to believe that God is actually keeping score.

The Pharisee in this morning's passage certainly fits the description. He prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." He means, "O God, you who keep score and who pass judgment, I am so glad that, unlike others, I am a good person. I am so glad that you that you will recognize my goodness, and their badness, too, O God."

Jesus contrasts the Pharisee with the tax collector, who admits he is a sinner and implores God to be merciful. Jesus says the tax collector is the one who goes home right with God.

This morning's parable is delicious, don't you think? We all know people like the Pharisee, don't we? Hypocrites? People who say they are religious but actually stand up for the most un-Christian things? People who are narrow-minded, like the Pharisee? People who can't see beyond their own noses? People who are arrogant and rude? People who are holier than Thou? People who despise certain others and even call them abominations? Finally, we have a delicious parable that we can use to prove that Jesus doesn't like the kind of Christians we don't like, the self-righteous prigs.

When I was a child in Western Massachusetts, we used to ice-skate on a slow-moving brook near the elementary school. The current was mostly in the middle, so the ice was thickest near the bank. If we tried to skate too early in the season, we would find that though it looked okay on the edge, we were soon skating on thin ice. And of course, thin ice could be deadly. To make things safe, until the ice was thick enough, the elementary school principal would put up a sign that said, "Danger, Thin Ice."

This morning's parable needs a sign that says the same thing, "Danger, Thin Ice." For to mix the metaphors, if we get to thinking that this parable is delicious, that it helps us point a finger at those who are like the Pharisee, then we are skating on thin ice, indeed. And the result can be deadly indeed.

Over history Christians have often thought that they were justified by Jesus' parables. Over history Christians have identified with the heroes of Jesus' stories and pointed their fingers at the Pharisees and the Scribes and the Lawyers and the Jews. And especially for the last of these, the Jews, the results have been deadly, indeed. It's why words like 'crusade' causes such fear among those whom Christianity has at times in the past demonized.

In every case we will better understand the intent of Jesus' parables if we put ourselves in the shoes not of the hero of the story, but of the rascal. In this morning's parable Jesus invites us to recognize the ways in which we are self-righteous and hypocritical. He invites us to see the ways in which we are like the Pharisee. And he invites us to strive to be like the tax collector instead – humble and self-effacing, recognizing our shortcomings and asking God for mercy and

forgiveness.

Of course there are many of us who may find that we are still on thin ice. Is it really a good idea to have such a low opinion of ourselves? Is it really better to beat our breasts and cry out that we are sinners? Is it right to strive to see ourselves as like the tax collector? Jesus is constantly telling us that we would be better to be things that we really don't want to be at all. Tax collectors? The IRS? Poor and lame? Children? Sinners? Beggars? Sick? Outcasts? What therapist in his or her right mind tries to get clients to think of themselves in these pejorative terms? Isn't the idea to learn to love ourselves, to build up, not tear down our self-esteem? How are we going to find any ice that isn't too thin for skating?

If Jesus' parables ought to come with a warning sign that says, "Danger, Thin Ice," they also ought to come with a sign that says, "Watch out, things aren't always as they appear." Or if we want to be really cute, the sign might say, "Watch out, the ice is thin but the truth is deep."

Let's look for a moment at the Pharisee, the person in the story that Jesus says we are most likely to be like. What is the problem with the Pharisee? He follows the rules. He does what is right. He works hard to be good. Aren't these good things? In and of themselves, they surely are.

But there is something about the Pharisee that gives him away. The Pharisee needs to compare himself to others. He needs to put others down. It doesn't take a psychologist to understand that the Pharisee in the story is not as secure as he pretends to be. He doesn't cheat or commit adultery. He tithes and fasts. And why? Because he desperately wants God to bless him. In a real sense he is trying to manipulate God. "Look at me, God. Look at me. I'm doing everything right. Look at that tax collector, God. What a sinner he is. I'm so glad, God, because I know you will reward me for not being like him!" To paraphrase Shakespeare, he thinks the man doth protest too much. The text suggests that the Pharisee trusts in himself that he is righteous. But in fact the opposite is true. The Pharisee in his heart of hearts is broken and fearful. He is uncertain and insecure. And to cover up it all up, he strives for perfection, not for what good a life of perfection might be like, but so that he can say to God, "O God, you know that I'm better than that guy over there, so you have to be on my side. God you have to love me; you have to love me better than him." This is not anything like self-love. It's a fraud. And where it leads is utterly dissatisfying. Buechner says of this pretend self-love that "instead of leading you to share with others the self you love, it leads you to keep your self in perpetual safe-deposit. You not only don't accrue any interest that way but become less and less interesting every day."²

Jesus knows that this uninteresting and boring Pharisee, this Pharisee who is broken but hides his brokenness behind a veil of hateful comparisons to his neighbor, is too often likely to be us. But even as we are like the Pharisee, instead of the reprisal and condemnation that the Pharisee fears, Jesus wants us to experience God's gracious mercy, despite how imperfect we are.

As unlikely as it at first seems, however, the only way to experience God's gracious mercy is through humility, through openly accepting our need for God's gracious mercy in the first place. It is a delicate balance, for on the one hand it requires the open admission our most

²*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 73.

profound shortcomings, but at the same time the belief that we are, nonetheless, fully worthy of God's love. The tax collector found his way to this balance. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," he said.

This is a personal, intimate moment of conversation with God. The tax collector is praying far off, by himself. It is a moment strictly between himself and God. He isn't trying to impress anyone, and that's important. For we can try to impress, or try to manipulate God with false humility just as easily as we can with pride. In fact, false humility is a form of pride. The late Professor Irwin Edman of Columbia University once had a chat with a French monk who bemoaned the fact that his order was not as famous as the Jesuits for scholarship or the Trappists for silence and good works. "But," he added, "when it comes to humility, we're tops."³ The monk was proud of his humility. The tax collector, though, talked honestly and straightforwardly with God. He didn't try to be tops at humility. Instead, he actually was humble.

It is an intimate and humble moment, one in which we can face the deep truth about ourselves, not through self-flagellation, but in grateful confidence that we are accepted and truly loved by God. It is a moment shared by the likes of the tax collector, by you and me, and by the truly great, the truly great.

Copernicus was a great mathematician. His studies and calculations revolutionized the thinking of humankind about the universe. When he lay dying, his book *The Revolution of the Heavenly Body* was placed in his hands. It had just been printed. At death's door, he saw himself, not as a great scholar, or astronomer, but only as a sinner in need of the Saviour.

On the tombstone at his grave at Frauenberg are carved the following words which he chose for his epitaph: "I do not seek a kindness equal to that given to Paul. Nor do I ask the grace granted to Peter. But that forgiveness which Thou didst grant to the robber—that, earnestly I crave!"⁴

Copernicus spoke the same sentiments as did the tax collector. And I am willing to venture that that is what allowed him to be truly great. There is an irony here. The tax collector prays that he is a sinner and asks for forgiveness, and Jesus says he goes home justified before God. Copernicus understood himself to be a sinner, and it allowed him to be a great thinker. Think of the Dali Lama. Think of Gandhi. Think of Mother Theresa. Think of Jesus himself. There's an old saying that God can't make much out of a big shot, but that God can make amazing things out of a person who is humble.

So, here's the irony. In that intimate, naked moment with God, when we confront ourselves without pretension, without self-justification, without shouting out that we're better than the guy standing over there, deep inside us God works the miracle that frees us to be greater than we ever imagined. I don't mean that we'll all become as well known as Mother Theresa, but we will be freed to move from that intimate moment with God into a life that can make a real difference. We aren't told what happens to the Pharisee and the tax collector in this morning's

³Tan, P. L. (1996, c1979). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations* : [a treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers]. Garland TX: Bible Communications.

⁴Ibid.

story. But there is little doubt which one God rejoices in. And there is little doubt, at least in my mind, which one will accomplish more good. It's such an odd thing, the way to God. It has so little to do with our self-righteous comparisons to others, and so much to do with our willingness to bare our small and fragile selves to God. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Amen.