

Proper 25C: Luke 18:9-14
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Why Doesn't God Like Religious People?

My wife Anna asked me an intriguing question a few weeks ago, as we were driving to North Carolina. She asked what movie or TV show best captures the job of being a priest. After thinking about it for a while, I confessed I could not think of any. In Hollywood, clergy are portrayed as either ineffectual and clueless—the kind Oliver Wendell Holmes described as too heavenly to be much earthly good—or else too worldly—pompous, self-aggrandizing hypocrites who are out for power and to fleece their congregations. That is certainly the angle taken by the recent TV show, “The Righteous Gemstones.” The show is not for everyone, to be sure. It’s a crass and irreverent depiction of a family of televangelists and megachurch pastors led by widowed patriarch Eli Gemstone, who with his immature adult children, lead opulent lives funded by church donations. The show is part farce, part satire of corrupt church leaders who it mocks through over-the-top dialog and absurdly preposterous scenarios. It all works, I suppose, because if there’s anything we can’t stand, it is those who consider themselves better than others, especially the religiously righteous. I mean, “religious” and ‘righteous’ and ‘hypocrite’ are virtual synonyms in contemporary society.

So when we come to this morning’s Gospel lesson, where we hear about a smug, self-righteous Pharisee coming before God, acting all high and mighty next to a tax collector, we fully expect Jesus to expose that arrogant son-of-a-gun for the hypocrite he is.

The thing is, that is not at all what Jesus’ audience would have expected. Because we frequently see the Pharisees as Jesus’ opponents in the gospels, foils for Jesus’ teachings, we all too easily think of the Pharisee as self-righteous hypocrites. But in making that judgment, we misunderstand the place of the Pharisees in Jewish society. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were not at all considered the bad guys. Quite the opposite. They were considered to be the “model Jew,” the best, most faithful among them. They were set apart from others by their faithful adherence to the Jewish Law. And the fact is, the Pharisee is not really a hypocrite either. Everything he says in the parable is true. He’s not a crook, a cheat, or a womanizer. He’s faithful to his wife, and loyal to his friends. He takes nothing he hasn’t honestly earned. He gives everyone he knows a fair deal. He is, by the standards of Jesus’ day, righteous—and pious. He’s what we would call a decent, Bible-believing, church-going man, self-disciplined but generous with his money, giving more than his share, a tenth of his income, to his congregation...an upright, pillar-of-the-community, the kind of guy you want on your vestry, on your corporation’s board and leading your Boy Scout Troop. So you can sympathize, or at least understand, the Pharisee when he prays: “God, I thank you that I am not like those other, awful people. I am not a thief, a rogue, or an adulterer, or God-forbid, like that tax collector over here.”

Now, the tax collector Jesus’ audience would never have cast him as the hero in this story. He was no good-hearted but misunderstood fellow, no generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the good-hearted hooker. He was a dirty, rotten scoundrel. More than just a crook, he was a collaborator, a quisling, a traitor to his people, working for the occupying Roman government,

cheating his countrymen out of their money. Tax collectors, you see, were given a territory, an area in which they were entitled to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans. The Romans didn't care how much money they took, so long as they got their share. So this guy had likely been living for years on the cream he has skimmed off his own people's milk money. He is a fat cat who drives a Maserati, who drinks nothing but Johnny Walker Blue Label, and who never shows up at a party without at least two \$500-a-night escorts in tow.

It's clear who is the better man here, who you would want to look up to, to be friends with. And it seems safe to assume that the Pharisee is the kind of guy God favors too. In fact, it's unthinkable to believe the contrary.

And yet, Jesus says that, when it comes to their salvation, it's the tax collector who gets God's approval. "I tell you," he says, "this man, the tax collector, went down to his home justified rather than the other." Wait, why doesn't the respectable, conscientious guy get the praise, but instead the scoundrel does? What gives?

Maybe it's like the old Jewish story I read recently: Once there was a rabbi who was at the point of death, so the Jewish community proclaimed a day of fasting in the town in order to induce the Heavenly Judge to commute the sentence of death. On that very day, when the entire congregation was gathered in the synagogue for penance and prayer, the town drunkard went to the village tavern for some schnapps. When another Jew saw him do this, he rebuked him, saying, "Don't you know this is a fast-day and you're not allowed to drink? Why, everybody's at the synagogue praying for the rabbi!" So the drunkard made his way to the synagogue too. And after he sat down, he prayed, "Dear God! Please restore our rabbi to good health...so that I can have my schnapps!" Amazingly, the rabbi recovered! The next Sabbath day, the rabbi was certain to point out the cause of his miraculous recovery: "May God preserve our village drunkard until he is 120 years old! Know that his prayer was heard by God when yours were not. For he put his whole heart and soul into his prayer!"

Or maybe it's because the tax collector was truly repentant. God does love a repentant sinner... Only, Jesus doesn't mention anything about the scoundrel changing his ways, nothing about him giving up his extortionist career or giving away his ill-gotten gains. There's nothing here that suggests he won't be in the temple a week from now, bewailing his 'manifold sins' all over again. To say that he's a changed man, that he's had a conversion of the heart, is to say more than Jesus says.

The tax collector simply cried out for mercy in a time of need, which is religion in its most basic, most self-centered form. It's certainly not something you can build a whole ethic around. Indeed, to do so would be to turn the mere admission of guilt into a virtue. It's to applaud as heroic the one who says, "I do not live by any high moral code, but neither does anyone else. So at least I'm not a phony." But there is something quite upsetting, to be sure, about letting moral carelessness become the accepted norm. And there is something quite dangerous about dismissing all moral standards as futile.

But, Jesus was making a different, even more scandalous point in this parable. Remember, Jesus did not tell this story to make the tax collector feel better about himself. Rather, he told it, Luke

says, “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” In other words, it is the “Pharisees,” the good, moral, religious types, he was speaking to, not the reprobate “tax collectors.” And these “good, decent people” in his midst, Jesus wants them to understand that they are mistaken about their righteousness. As Luke says, he has trusted in himself. His prayer of gratitude may be spoken to the Lord, but it is really in congratulation of himself. He sees his righteousness as an achievement, something he accomplished by himself.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he possesses no means by which to claim righteousness. He has done nothing deserving of merit; indeed, he has done much to offend God’s law. He knows how awful, wretched, debased he is. For this reason he stands back, hardly daring to approach the Temple, and throws himself on the mercy of the Lord. He doesn’t really pray; he blurts out a desperate cry for help: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Here is the essential contrast. Rather than be grateful for his blessings, the Pharisee appears smug to the point of despising others. Or perhaps he is grateful, but only when he compares himself to others. The tax collector, on the other hand, stakes his hopes and claims not on anything he has done or deserved, but entirely on the mercy of God. The Pharisee can’t see that, despite his piety and morals, before God, he is no better off than the tax collector. As a matter of fact, the Pharisee is worse off, because, while they’re both losers, the tax collector at least has the good sense to recognize the fact and ask God to make up the deficit.

At this point, I imagine you’re thinking, *Thank God, I’m not like that Pharisee!* But of course thinking that way just proves that we are indeed like him!

Indeed, as much as we hate to admit it, we Christians can act just like the Pharisee. A colleague of mine tells how he went to a church convention where he said the self-righteousness was overwhelming. All day long, for an entire week, people rushed to the microphone to proclaim to their virtue. “Maybe the rest of you can sit back and do nothing about the scourge of Malaria, but I am moved to speak and to say that you ought to do something about it. Look at what I am doing!” Or, “I dissent from the majority vote because I am really in pain over the plight of those in poverty. Call me crazy, but I will stand with Jesus.” Behind such statements was the implicit claim, “I am holier than thou. God has given me a particularly vehement and insightful indignation that the rest of you lack. Now I will lecture you on what the rest of you ought to be doing, so the rest of you can live the Christian life as successfully as I am now living it.” The self-righteousness was truly insufferable, he said. And then he mused that perhaps his indignation at their indignation, his condemnation of their moral condemnation, shows that he is far from immune to the very sin of self-righteousness that he was condemning in the others! “God, I thank you that I am not like these other delegates!”

Christians, of course, are not the only ones guilty of justifying ourselves over others. There are plenty of modern-day “Pharisees” outside the church too, you know, the ones who scorn those in the church: “God, I thank you that I may not be the very best person in the world, but at least I am better than all of those self-righteous hypocrites in the church.” I reckon it’s universal, this putting others down, looking down at others in order to make ourselves look taller before God.

But as Jesus' parable teaches, the point isn't who is better than who, who is the most smugly self-righteous, or the most wretchedly humble. All of our positioning, all our posturing, this me-versus-them, precisely misses the point. The point of the parable isn't whether the Pharisee is better than the tax collector, or vice versa. The point is that the Pharisee and the tax collector are both dead, and their only hope is someone who can raise the dead.

And that is precisely what Jesus came to do—to raise the dead. Not to teach the teachable, nor to reform the reformable, nor to improve the improvable, but to give new life to the dead. He came to resurrect those who are dead in their sins, both the obvious sins like theft and adultery, as well as the less obvious ones like self-righteous smugness.

When the church starts acting like the Pharisee in today's lesson, we are forgetting that God didn't create the church to tell the world about all the things it is doing wrong. God created the church rather to be a witness, to proclaim and showcase to the world God's determination to love and to rule the world, all of it.

We Christians have been called out, in order to show the world the power of God's grace, power that overcomes our tendency to lift ourselves up by putting others down. That same power, that same Spirit, is at work in all of us, the Pharisees and tax-collectors among us alike. And for that we can say, Thanks be to God!