

Let us pray: *Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ we pray...Amen.* (Collect for Proper 18 in *The Book of Common Prayer*, New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979, p. 233.)

The story we just heard sets before us two ways of prayer, two ways of life, two paths that people follow as their religion. Let's consider what they are and the choice that these two ways give us.

Forms of religion can set people apart from the rest of humanity and leave them there in a sort of glorious isolation. Forms of religion can also set people apart from others for a time, but then lead them back to others in true and compassionate solidarity. On its face, the same temple, the very same faith, embraces both the tax collector and the Pharisee in Jesus' parable.

Whatever else he is, the Pharisee is no liar. He really is different from other people, even the people who share his faith. The requirement is to fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, but this Pharisee fasts two days every week. The requirement is to tithe on certain sources of income, but this Pharisee gives away one tenth of his entire income. He is quite zealous in his faith.

And he is thankful to God. Certainly, we would agree that thankfulness is close to the heart of true religion. But consider what causes the Pharisee's thankfulness: not God's mercy and grace which enable him to do what he does, but rather his righteous behavior which makes him unlike other people, sets him apart from them. The Pharisee is no liar, and he is thankful, but still his prayer seems stifling. It would make us gasp. In only a few words, he cuts off all other people from consideration, and centers on his little self alone. The word "I" appears four times in his brief prayer, and each time it seems to be spoken with an air of self-congratulation.

Even though his prayer is addressed to God, it seems that God ends up getting cut off and kept outside. There is nothing really for God to do. The Pharisee has it all well in hand. In what is presented as a prayer, this Pharisee sounds as though he is talking to himself. Perhaps he is.

The self-satisfaction of this Pharisee indicates someone turned in on self, someone small and satisfied to be small. Absent is any longing for God, any hunger for the holy. He's more interested in "holierness" than holiness, but holiness is not a contest, it's a calling. The Pharisee is no immediate threat, but he is pitiful, someone who sooner or later reveals himself as a supreme bore. Pity our God who must listen to such prayers!

The Pharisee not only dismisses other people as one single mass of perdition, but also damns them by categories. They are thieves, rogues, adulterers. In his eyes, they are no more than their sins, nor are they made in God's image, nor are they candidates for redemption. This Pharisee unhesitatingly thrusts them away from any humane consideration—including the repentant brother who stands nearby, the tax collector Jesus includes in the story.

Not all Pharisees were like this, of course. Some were people of deep compassion. But for the one satirized here by Jesus, “holiness” is a hard shell, made strong to keep the world out. Some people pass through a hard-shell stage and go on to something more mature. Perhaps for them the hard-shell experience is a necessary stage. But others move into a hard shell and stay there. They stay there, but it’s not that they don’t change. Something vital inside them dries up. Others do not necessarily choose to join them inside the hard shell, and so these others are seen as a threat, and because so much is at stake, the Pharisee inside the hard shell believes the solution is abusive behavior.

The abuse may be physical or verbal. It may be random or institutional. But if keeping separate from the bad guys, maintaining absolute purity, is the name of the game, then abusing the opposition sounds like a smart solution. If I am not like them, then they are not like me, and it follows that I can treat as inconsequential whatever personal damage they suffer as a result of sin.

This descent into deeper and deeper sin is not exclusive to any one group of people. It turns up in many religions and worldviews, even ones that reject it explicitly. It can grip exotic foreigners. It can grip ordinary Americans. It can turn up, even in holy places, even in the church, and it does.

Remember that Jesus presents the Pharisee as a devout man, praying in the temple. In contrast to the Pharisee, Jesus presents a tax collector, but let’s not jump to romanticize this figure. Part of the power of the story is the shock value. The Pharisee is a religious hero, but one with a very hard heart. The tax collector is a moral, spiritual, and maybe patriotic failure, but he’s moving in the right direction, so there’s hope for him.

Remember that in the time and place of Jesus, tax collectors were not straight arrow types or disinterested bureaucrats whose phone calls are monitored to ensure they are courteous to their customers. Far from it! Tax collectors in those days had turned their backs on their own people and gone in league with the Romans for nothing more than financial gain. Their contract demanded that they collect a pile of money for the empire and they were allowed to keep what they could extort beyond that. The tax collector was held in near-universal contempt and lived a life of isolation. Perhaps the best contemporary parallel would be a wholesale drug dealer who carries a revolver tucked in his belt.

So, one of these moral, spiritual, and patriotic failures dares to show his face in the temple. He can’t claim to practice fasting. He’s probably into conspicuous consumption. He doesn’t give tithes to good causes. He’s too busy ripping people off. Probably, he cannot remember the last time he was in the house of God.

But this much must be said for him: his heart has not entirely frozen over. He stares at his shoes; he doesn’t dare look anybody in the eye, much less lift his head in grateful prayer. With a closed fist he beats his chest more than once. This is no mere ritual gesture; it is the overflow of powerful emotion from someone who sees his exceptionally ugly life for what it is. His prayer is a cry, only seven words, but heart piercing: *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”*

His heart is a pigsty, a slaughterhouse, yet with these words, he flings wide the doors, and begs for God to enter in. He is a person radically dissatisfied with himself, and desperate for grace. Where the Pharisee’s

prayer is self-centered, the tax collector's prayer is God-centered. He wastes no time in assessing other people or comparing himself to them. He makes no reference to what he has done, or not done. He knows that God knows him, and this finally breaks him open and makes him want something better than all he is and all he has done.

This tax collector has a long journey in front of him, but—thank God—he's going in the right direction. While the Pharisee continues to build his hard shell, something breaks the hard shell of this tax collector's sin and drags him into the light of God's mercy. And because he is bathed in the compassion of God, there's a good chance he will look on other people with compassion too.

The Pharisee is thankful that he is *not* like other people and becomes less and less connected with them. The tax collector starts out isolated from others, but he hits bottom and meets the glorious God of grace. There, he rejoices that he *is* like others, because God means to give mercy to all, and all who follow God must mean mercy for all, a mercy that transforms the undeserving, and is greater than the powers of death.

Religion can take us in one of two different directions: in a way which is humble or a way in which we can expect to be humbled. But in the end only one of those ways will lead us to God. In a book of daily readings, St. Isaac of Syria describes this path: "A compassionate heart, he tells us, 'is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips [their] heart; as a result of this deep mercy [their] heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on an injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation. This is why he constantly offers up prayers full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy.'" (A. M. Allchin, ed., *Daily Readings with St. Isaac of Syria*, translated by Sebastian Brock, Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1989, p. 29.)

Here in *this* temple, which man will you emulate: the Pharisee or the tax collector? Here in your life, which path will you take: a humble life or a life in which you will be involuntarily humbled? The one that leads into a hard shell, or the way that leads outward into the land of the living?

There's one last thing—an extremely practical question—that I don't want us to miss about this well-known parable. How are we to become humble people? Is it a do-it-yourself project? Do we simply *make* ourselves live more humbly? First we must be humble enough to recognize that we can't even do that on our own. The storyteller, our only Savior, must help us. It's not enough for me to say to you today: "You need to be a humble person." Because then we begin to compare ourselves to others and we're tempted to think, "Well, at least I'm more humble than that guy." When we say that, we've lost the battle.

Is Jesus suggesting that we try to disappear, to lead a life that is so small that no one would ever notice? Don't get too flashy? No, not that! He's saying that Pharisees and tax collectors *both* need a Savior.

Humility can't redeem us any more than being good can redeem us. But what humility **DOES** is crucial. It reveals **WHO** redeems us, and it's not us.

Because we all need God. We all need a Savior. Amen.