

## “God, Thank You, But...” - Luke 18:9-14

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Well, here's another one of those pesky, familiar parables we've all heard umpteen times before! And the author of Luke has given us a pretty straightforward answer or conclusion to it: “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Okay. I guess we can all go home now! Give me a break, Luke - is it really that simple? I don't know; that just feels too easy and - well - watered down. We've got so many ways of saying this: “Don't toot your own horn” and “Be careful who you judge lest you be judged” and things like that. Platitudes that go in one ear and out the other.

[*pause*]

And what's so wrong about what the Pharisee is saying? As I sit with this text, my thoughts go to the Pharisee - and I agree with him! I'm glad I'm not a thief or a rogue! I'm truly glad I haven't ever robbed a bank. By the way, did you know that that's one of the least successful crimes you can do? Bank robbers almost always get caught. Just a word of caution...

And it's not just really obvious bad guys like that that I'm glad I'm not like. Have you ever noticed that Trailer Parks are often on the edge of town? Eventually, you run into railroad tracks. They are always quite an eclectic collection! And I even have some sympathy for folks who live in trailer parks because I once lived in a trailer park myself. I'm glad I don't live in one now. [*pause*] That's terrible, isn't it? And I apologize to anyone here who lives in a trailer park! There's nothing wrong with trailer parks! But there it is, why would you believe me now after I've just said I'm glad I don't live in one anymore?

Now Tax Collectors - don't get me started! Actually, we need a different image here to be faithful to the context in Luke's time. The Jews were an occupied people - they lived under Roman rule - the “tax collector” was a Jew who worked for the Romans collecting the Roman tax and maybe lining their own pockets while they were at it! Many were extortionists, basically. So they were easy to look down upon. Nowadays, we've got so many folks we find easy to put down, don't we? Illegal aliens, drug dealers, government informants, etc., etc. I mean, let's face it, I'm really glad I don't do drugs...anymore and I'm glad I never cheated on my taxes...and got caught and...uhh, I think I've said enough!

You see? I end up focused on the Pharisee in this story - he makes sense! Oh, I don't want to be judgmental of people but haven't you felt like the Pharisee at least sometimes? Saying, “Thank you, God, but I'm sure glad I'm normal and not like those other people!” In fact, that's the problem with most of these folks the Pharisee lists, isn't it? They're not normal - like us. Some singer/songwriter friends of mine, Rich and Jacqui, of the group ‘Small Potatoes’, have a great song that sums this up - here's a portion of the lyric:

He was a cuff link, cut throat, duck top boyish man,  
hard-nosed, Dow Jones, CEO, a snake in the grass  
She was a high class, high toned, bleached blond socialite  
lips sucked, tummy tucked, stuck up - and she was his wife

He's mixing models in LA, she rolls his Rolls into a lake  
When she gets 30 million, lawyers take a holiday  
They were made for love! Two hands, one whole  
What heaven has brought upon us  
let no one touch with a 10 foot pole  
They're not normal like us!  
They're nothing like none of our friends  
I know we may not be perfect  
thank God we're nothing like them...

See? That's all the Pharisee is saying, "they're not normal - like us."

[pause]

Of course, we hardly ever think or say stuff like this in such harsh language. We've got nice, genteel ways to say it. There's always the ubiquitous 'but'. We've all heard people say things like:

"I don't like to gossip, but..." and,

"That looks great, but..." and what about,

"I don't mean to butt in, but...!"

That 'but' let's us make the comparison, let's us make the judgment, let's us 'help' someone do better. That 'but' makes a dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. And that can lead to:

"Everyone's welcome here, but..." or,

"God loves everyone, but..."

Yeah, but. But God, if you'd just do things *this* way, *they'd* be better. I wonder. If God actually did things *this* way, would *we* be better? But... they're not normal - like us.

[pause]

Then there's my all-time favorite euphemism for that 'but' - 'bless her heart'. Yes! You know that one too?! You can say the most awful things about anyone if you just wrap it up with, "bless her heart!" Things like,

"She has the decorating taste of a blind person on prozac - bless her heart!" or,

"He's so pigheaded, he'd let his house burn down rather than ask for help, bless his heart!"

Do you see? They're not normal - like us. Thank you, God, but... They're so - bless their hearts!

'Us' verses 'them' - that's all this is. And that'd be another simple conclusion to this text - but it's not that simple. The Pharisee isn't out at Walmart, he's in the Temple - the holy place, sacred ground. And he's not talking to anyone, he's 'standing by himself' the parable says. 'Praying' the parable says. How does he even notice the tax collector? The parable says the tax collector was 'standing far off'. So - if the Pharisee is praying, even praying for things I think I'd pray for too, how does he notice the tax collector? Is he checking to make sure everyone notices his 'praying'? How can he be paying attention to God if he's gawking all around the Temple? And then saying stuff like he's something special - "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" as though that was a big deal.

On the other hand, there's this tax collector. He's not looking around, he's not even looking up to heaven. And he's not saying 'thank you' to God or anything.

In fact, he's not comparing himself or his actions with anyone. He says, with no reference to anyone else, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" No 'buts', no 'thank God, we're nothing like them!' Nothing to distract him from God; nothing to come between him and God. And nothing to distance himself from anyone else.

You see, that's what I wonder about. Do I, like the Pharisee, get so caught up in my own sense of righteousness that I take my eye and heart off God and end up playing God and separating my world into 'us' verses 'them'? And what would it take to cause you to move me from your 'us' column to the 'them' group?

What if I smoked a cigarette while I was preaching? What if I brought politics up almost every time I spoke? What if I said I knew what God wanted and it was to smite all those evil doers over there? Wherever 'there' is? Would that cause you to even forget the 'bless his heart' qualifier with respect to me?

[*pause*]

You see? This is hard stuff. The simplistic answer of it's 'just us vs. them' won't do. On our own, I'm not sure we can overcome this separation. But maybe the image of the tax collector can be a guide, a template or example for us.

The Pharisee is really just praying to himself, isn't he? The tax collector's focused on God. I'll bet he never even noticed the Pharisee. So I guess it comes down to who you're praying to.

Would you be listening with God and praying to God saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" no matter whether I was a Pharisee or a tax collector or a preacher with suspect theology?? Would you see 'us' verses 'them' and say 'bless his heart'? Or could you let go and let God be your focus?

Who's praying to God - and who's praying to himself?

Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

May it be so always. Amen.