

Our Gospel lesson today is a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. It's one of those short parables that can easily trip us up. We might wrongly assume that the Pharisees are always the bad guys in Bible stories, so the Pharisee is obviously going to be wrong no matter what he does. Plus, Jesus hung out a lot with tax collectors, so they must be the good guys. So it's no surprise Jesus is siding with the good guys over the bad guys.

Actually, that's not point of the parable. Jesus' audience wouldn't have heard it that way at all.

So we need to step back for a moment into Jesus' world and worldview, otherwise we'll miss something important. So I want to look again at the Parable. But first, I need to say a bit about Pharisees, then a bit about Tax Collectors.

As 21st century Christians, we misunderstand the Pharisees. The Pharisees were not the "black-hatted" bad guys in the Gospels. In fact, if you asked people in Jesus time for adjectives to describe Pharisees, they'd probably say things like "holy... faithful... spiritual." The Pharisees by and large were good religious people. Jesus had more in common with the Pharisees than any other Jewish group. Let me say that again. Jesus had more in common with the Pharisees than any other Jewish group. In Jesus' time, one would expect a Pharisee to be an example of proper religious behavior.

In fact, look at what the Pharisee says: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."<sup>1</sup> Wow. This guy takes his faith seriously. He lives what he preaches. Plus, he tithes. This guy is the kind of guy we would like to have as a member of St. Paul's.

On the other hand, there is a Tax Collector. We have no perfect parallel in our culture. The closest thing we might think of is an IRS agent coming to do an audit. But that's nothing compared to a first century tax collector.

First century tax collectors were political traitors. They were Jews who sold out, Jews who worked for the occupying Roman military government. They were almost always extortionists. They basically paid a hefty franchise fee to the Romans. Then they got to keep everything they collected. This would encourage them to try to collect as much as they possibly could.

The system was often open to abuse. And they could even tweak the tax rate to whatever level they thought they could get away with. As George Harrison sang on the Beatles' *Revolver* album:

*If you drive a car, I'll tax the street  
If you try to sit, I'll tax your seat  
If you get too cold I'll tax the heat  
If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 18:12

<sup>2</sup> "Taxman," *Revolver*

That's the way tax collectors acted in Jesus' day. Tax collectors were the lowest of the low as far as good Jews were concerned.

So, in the Temple we have a Pharisee, a good religious guy, and a tax collector, the scum of the earth.

And yet, there are a couple of problems with this particular Pharisee.

Jesus says, "The Pharisee (was) standing by himself."<sup>3</sup> This doesn't hit our radar screens, but it's important. It's a rather arrogant thing. He doesn't want to stand next to other people. They might be religiously unclean. They might brush up against him and contaminate him. And so he stands off by himself to keep himself religiously pure.

And he prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."<sup>4</sup> Notice what his "prayer" is. It's centered on him. 'Thank you that I'm not like all those other people. They're nothing but trash. I'm so much better than they are. They're scum. I'm wonderful. So, thank you God.'

And then he brags about how holy he is: "I fast twice a week."<sup>5</sup> Most pious Jews only fasted once a week. 'I do it twice a week.' "I give a tenth of all my income."<sup>6</sup> Most Jews only practiced an agricultural tithe, tithing their crops and their livestock only. 'I give a tenth of ALL my income. That means I'm just a little bit superior to all of them. No actually I'm quite a bit superior to all of them.'

The Pharisee doesn't talk about how wonderful he is relative to God's standards. He just talks about how wonderful he is compared to everyone else around him. The Pharisee's prayer focuses only on himself. And it's a lose/lose prayer.

1. He loses out completely in his relationship with other people. That's because he's in competition with them. He pulls himself up only by pushing them down. They have to look bad in order to make him look good.

2. He loses out in his relationship with God. That's because he puts himself first. He doesn't need God. He's doing quite well all by himself. He says, 'I fast. I tithe. I'm not like everyone else.' He's not praying to God. He's not thanking God for God's gifts and his grace. Instead, the Pharisee is simply informing God about how good he himself is. It's a lose/lose prayer.

Now there's a danger for us as Christian disciples. We can make the same mistake the Pharisee made. "O Lord, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee." If we pray a prayer like that, we fall into exactly the same trap. Instead, as Christians, it's important for us to look

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<sup>3</sup> Lk 18:11

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Lk 18:12

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

to the example of the tax collector. The tax collector? Isn't he the bad guy? Well, let's look at what he does.

Jesus says, "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven."<sup>7</sup> He was standing far off, separate from everyone else. But his separation is different from the Pharisees. The Pharisee was standing by himself so he wouldn't get contaminated. The tax collector was standing far off so because people didn't want to have anything to do with him.

And he wouldn't look up to heaven. Jews prayed with arms upraised and eye looking upward. That's one of the reasons we priests pray like this <<do orans position>> at times during the service. But the tax collector did not count himself worthy to approach God so boldly. Instead, Jesus says, "he was beating his breast"<sup>8</sup> which was a sign of repentance and sorrow.

And he was saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"<sup>9</sup> Literally he says, "God be merciful to me, THE sinner." The tax collector offers sorrow for his sins. He knows he needs God. He knows that by God's standards he falls far short of what God requires. So he asks for God's mercy and grace.

And Jesus says, "I tell you, this man (this tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other (rather than the Pharisee)."<sup>10</sup>

The tax collector is justified. That's a legal term. It means he's found 'not guilty' before God. But there's another nuance.

On a word processor there are buttons to justify the margins. We can align the page to the right margin, or to the left margin, or to both

So the tax collector is justified, Jesus says—he is in alignment with the way God would have us think and act.

And Jesus tells us that the Pharisee remains un-justified. He is not in alignment with God. That means that he is still on the hook for his sins.

Irony of ironies: The Pharisee is guilty because in his pride and arrogance he thinks he only needs himself. This puts him out of alignment with God. The tax collector is found not guilty, because he knows he's a sinner and he asks for God's forgiveness. This puts him in alignment with God.

It's a paradox. No one is too sinful to be saved by God's grace. But it is possible to be so self-righteous that you don't know you need forgiveness.

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<sup>7</sup> Lk 18:13

<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> Lk 18:14

Things are turned upside down. Jesus says "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The bottom line lesson for us as Christians is this: Nothing we do makes us automatically exempt from sin. To put it another way, the opportunity to sin is present in every act, no matter how pious.

Worshipping. Praying. Giving. These are all wonderful things. But if our heart is not in the right place, all of these things can become spiritual pitfalls and traps.

We always need to keep in mind who we are, and who God is. We are broken and sinful people who always stand in need of repentance and God's grace. If you think that you're so wonderful and perfect that you don't need God, then you're spiritually in deep trouble.

We also need to keep in mind who we are in relationship to others. Because it's so easy to fall into the Pharisee's trap. It's easy to make ourselves look better at the expense of other people. Now, we might not come right out and blatantly say, "I thank you God that I am not like them."

No, we're much more subtle. But we do almost the same thing. We complain about other people. We gossip. We blame. We gripe. We focus on their faults. That way we don't have to deal with our own. "Let me tell you what he said." "You won't believe what she did this time." "How can anybody act that way?"

"O Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people: imperfect, flawed, irritable, emotional." Those kind of statements are a lose/lose situation. As the old saying goes, when you point the finger of blame at someone else, you have three fingers pointing back at you.

God doesn't call us to compare ourselves to each other. God calls us to compare ourselves to his standard. How do we compare to Jesus Christ? St. Paul gives us the classic answer: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>11</sup>

And paradoxically, that's good news. That levels the playing field.

To complain about other people only serves to insulate us from our constant need to ask for God's forgiveness and grace in our lives.

Living in grace, living with forgiveness, we can thus live more and more like the people he calls us to be.

Not with pride, or gossip, or self-righteousness.  
But with forgiveness and a firm reliance the grace of our loving God.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled...  
but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

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<sup>11</sup> Romans 3:23