

## **"NOSES UP, EYES SHUT"**

**Luke 18:9-14**

**November 3, 2019**

*Lord, it's hard to be humble. Humility is one of the most elusive spiritual practices. Judging is easy; realizing that we are in need of God's shaping, God's forgiving, and God's graciousness is the harder emotion. Hear what the Spirit is saying in this parable from Jesus as told by Luke in Chapter 18:9-14:*

Jesus told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.'

"Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'"

Jesus commented, "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

*Here ends the gospel. May God bless these words as we apply them to our lives.*

A DEA officer stopped at a spread near Kiowa and talked with an old rancher. He told the rancher, "I need to inspect your ranch for illegally grown drugs."

The rancher said, "Okay , but don't go in that field over there....", as he pointed out the location. The DEA officer verbally exploded saying, " Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government. You'd best not mess with me!"

Reaching into his rear pants pocket, the arrogant officer removed his badge and proudly displayed it to the rancher. "See this badge?! This badge means I am allowed to go wherever I wish...On any land, at any time! No questions asked or answers given!! Have I made myself clear...now step aside, Citizen!"

The rancher nodded politely, apologized, and went about his chores.

A short time later, the old rancher heard loud screams, looked up, and saw the DEA officer running for his life, being chased by the rancher's big Santa Gertrudis bull.

With every step the bull was gaining ground on the officer, and it seemed likely that he'd sure enough get gored before he reached safety. The officer was clearly terrified.

The rancher threw down his tools, ran to the fence and yelled at the top of his lungs...

"Your badge, Mister, show him your **BADGE!!**"

*O Lord, it's hard to be humble...*

This week's parable is a continuation of Jesus' discourse in Luke about faithfulness. We have asked the questions in previous weeks this month, "How much faith is enough?" and "How do I best express gratitude to God for the blessing that is my life?" Last week, I addressed questions in "Ask the Pastor" about how we can be both faithful *and* grateful, better model Jesus, pray for the world, and recognize God's plan for us. Today, Jesus asks the question, "Who is more faithful: the arrogant, but pious, Pharisee, or the penitent, deeply flawed, tax collector?"

To understand this question, we must first understand its context. Trying to read the Bible without its background and setting is like trying to read a map without an understanding of its byways and highways. You can do it, I suppose, but you will get lost and you will take many wrong turns.

In First Century Roman and Jewish times, the Pharisees are the religious elite. We know that. They usually get a bad rap in Christian circles for their harassment of Jesus, not understanding the gift that he is to their people. But it's also important to note that the Pharisees try to make the Torah, the book of the history of the Jews in relationship to God, accessible to the people. They are painted by the Gospelers as smug and self-serving, which may be accurate, but they

also are some of the most liberal scholars of their time in their interpretations of pharisaic law.

If Pharisees are held in the highest regard in first century Jewish religious life, tax collectors are about as low as you can go. The Pharisee is the paragon. By contrast, the tax collector gouges what he can from the poor and enriches the wealthy. He himself gains wealth on the backs of powerless people. He pays the empire a set amount for the privilege of squeezing whatever he can from his neighbors. Although personally responsible for the taxes owed by his district, he is free to collect them any way he wants. Often tax collectors are foreigners who hire thugs to do their dirty work for them, thereby setting up an elaborate and effective pyramid scheme of graft. One can fall no lower on the virtue scale than the tax collector.

As we have come to expect from Jesus, the character we would assume to be favored by God is lacking, and the one we assume to be condemned by God is the one who receives the blessing. In this case, a flawed human demonstrating humility is exalted over the pious human who is arrogant.

The Pharisee's prayer is reminiscent of that of the writer of Psalm 17, who pleads his case for piety before God:

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,  
If you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;  
my mouth does not transgress.  
As for what others do, by the word of your lips  
I have avoided the ways of the violent.  
My steps have held fast to your paths;  
my feet have not slipped.

"See, God? I am faithful and my spiritual practice is without fault. Not like that other guy. I'm so glad I'm not like *him*." The tax collector might be singing his own Psalm 51, as he prays his contrite heart out to his Creator: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions." He is humble; he is in need of redemption. His concern is not with the piousness or perfection of any other person. While the Pharisee is concerned with his own ranking, the taxman is focused only on God; as the religious one sings his own praises, the sinner laments his own humanness.

Reformed theology traces all human misdeeds back to the story of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, known as the original sin. John Calvin and Karl Barth claim that we cannot NOT sin, and only God offers us redemption, which they call "justification." Barth in his 1958 thesis, *Church Dogmatics*, summarizes this parable of the proud Pharisee and the troubled tax collector this way: "The Pharisee sees his status before God to be the result of his own actions. His prayer is

about all the good religious practice he exhibits. The tax collector is ashamed of his actions. His prayer is about what he has done to dishonor God."

I don't follow Original Sin theology. Rather than accepting their claim that we are born into sin and Jesus must atone for our inherent inadequacies with his death, I believe we are born into love and to Love we will one day return. I don't know about you, but I don't want to live under the yoke of God's divine disapproval; I think God-Alive envisions a wonderful life for us and steers us in that direction.

The Iona Community in Scotland has a gift for articulating through tune and lyrics many of the joys and challenges of living the disciple's life in a complex world. In their song, "Sing Hey for the Carpenter," Jesus invites worshippers to "Come with me, come wander," celebrating the liberation that comes through leaving behind false things that were once a source of meaning and comfort. Part of the chorus celebrates the carpenter, Jesus, leaving behind his tools. "Sing hey for the Pharisees leaving their rules! Sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets! Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!"

*Lord, it is hard to be humble.* Pastor Lauren Sugg helps us by painting a picture of this parable we might all be able to relate to:

A self-righteous church goer prays: "O Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other people: my next-door neighbor who is enjoying a round of golf right now instead of attending worship; my family member in the other political party who does not understand your will for our nation like I do; or that scruffy-looking fellow in the pew behind me. I am here every Sunday morning and often during the week. I pledge faithfully; I serve on three important church committees."

I have been guilty of this kind of self-adulation. As I study this parable, I am acutely aware of my own prideful ways. It's easy to fall into the trap of imagining ourselves at the Pearly Gates justifying our earthly history to good Ole Saint Pete. I *surely* deserve to get into heaven! Afterall, I am a professional religious person! I've dedicated much of my life to serving God. But I don't know if *you* deserve to be here. Maybe you deserve to go, you know, *down there*.

On the other hand, it takes us messing up *royally* to gain the humility of the tax collector, and then we claim we can't help it, it's Original Sin's fault, you know? When we hit rock bottom, it's easy to call out to God for help in self-loathing and self-immolation. Pastor Laura continues:

Church can sometimes be a fairly hostile place for this kind of authentic remorse and humility. Our comfort with the idea that we at times [transgress against God's will] does not translate into the wish to hear in detail about any particular sin, thank you very much.

Jesus reminds us in this parable that appearances can be deceiving. The one who exalts himself is humbled, while the humble one is exalted. Hooray for us. Boo for them who do not measure up to our standards, who do not follow the rules as we do.

When Mac Davis wrote in 1974 his signature song, "It's Hard to Be Humble," he was the voice of every man and every woman who has lived enough of life to know the internal struggle of the Pharisee. His lyrics say what our heart already knows:

Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble  
When you're perfect in every way  
I can't wait to look in the mirror  
'Cause I get better lookin' each day  
To know me is to love me  
I must be a heck of a human  
Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble  
But I'm doin' the best that I can!

But Jesus says,

Not so fast. Go ahead and show your badge to the charging bull and see where that lands you! When the world is coming after you because of your own prideful folly, humble yourself before our loving and merciful God, and get out of the way! You do not have the grace of God's unconditional love because of what you do, but rather because of what God does for you.

Johnny Cash's timeless ballad, "I Hung My Head," tells the opposing story, the story of the tax collector. In the ballad, a young one has senselessly murdered another and is brought before justice. The guilty sinner laments:

Here in the courthouse  
The whole town was there  
I see the judge  
High up in the chair  
"Explain to the court room  
What went through your mind  
And we'll ask the jury  
What verdict they find."

Early one morning  
With time to kill  
I see the gallows  
Up on a hill  
And out in the distance  
A trick of the brain  
I see a lone rider  
Crossing the plain

And he'd come to fetch me  
To see what they'd done  
And we'll ride together  
To kingdom come  
I prayed for God's mercy  
'Cause soon I'd be dead  
I hung my head  
I hung my head

I daresay we have all hung our heads in the presence of God. It's amazing that Spirit stands by us, never turning away from us, with all the evil we are capable of doing. God's love is redemptive, and that is the purest expression of grace, yes, it is.

The Iona Community reminds us that balance is the key. We cannot trust in our ability to fulfill the law to save us, yet we do not abandon the law. We humble ourselves before a merciful God yet are confident in the Lord's promises. Whether Pharisee or tax collector by nature, all find welcome in God's temple.

Jesus invites us,

Come join me, come wander, come welcome the world,  
Where strangers might smile, or stones may be hurled.  
Come leave what you cling to, lay down what you clutch,  
And find with hands empty, the heart can hold much.

Sing hey for the Carpenter, leaving his tools.  
Sing hey for the Pharisees leaving their rules!  
Sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets!  
Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!"  
Sing hey!

*May It Be So.*