
Homily

The Reverend Deacon Edward Fuller
Homily on October 28, 2007 - Evensong
The Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip - Atlanta, Georgia

Luke 18:9-14: Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted". When Christ looked at some of those gathered around Him, He saw that they relied for their salvation, on their own righteousness, on their works, on their perceived moral purity, rather than on the mercy of God. Jesus and his disciples had met many who were like this. In response to this misplaced self-confidence, Jesus told them the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

A parable is a teaching story so the characters are not real and that is good news. The bad news comes when we take on the behavior of the character and exhibit behavior that looks like walks like and quacks like a Pharisee.

The Pharisee's prayer is nothing but a boast, a self serving advertisement. Listen to his prayer; "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector".

The Pharisee, considering others as nothing, treats them accordingly. It is typical of human nature to elevate itself while putting down others and some believe that this is the only way to elevate themselves above their peers. This parable gives us an example of succumbing to that temptation. In Isaiah 65:5 we read about people: ". . . who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!' These are smoke in [God's] nostrils, a fire that burns all the day". I think I would prefer not to be known as "smoke in God's nostrils".

The Pharisee's prayer is a clear example of people who trust in their own works to gain salvation and eternal life, not trusting that Jesus, through His death and resurrection, has affirmed the clear path to salvation and eternal life. This parable is about temptation and humility.

The temptations before us each day can be overwhelming. We live in a society that rewards personal achievement. Win a negotiation for the purchase of a business and the business press sings your praises; although I must tell you that the press in general fails to recognize God's part. Athletes are bombarded with messages that affirm the individual's success. Record breaking salaries are paid to those who excel. The temptation is to accept the praise and focus in a prideful way. But, we don't have to do that! Many people who are judged successful by the standards imposed by society are also successfully maintaining a balanced perspective and greet these successes with great personal humility. One must learn, as they have, to

mount a defense against such temptations if we are to learn to walk humbly before our Lord.

The Tax Collector in stark opposition to the Pharisee was not prideful, he was not self serving. He stood apart from the others, so humble that he would not even look up to heaven. He humbled himself before God, acknowledged his sins and begged for God's mercy. To conclude the parable, Jesus gives us some very specific, unambiguous advice. He says that if we want to act like the Pharisee and exalt ourselves, we will be humbled - he doesn't say we'll be given the opportunity to become humble, he says we will be humbled. On the other hand if we want to act humbly, we will be exalted. That's an easy choice to make but I suggest to you that being humble is not always the easiest thing to do.

This man, this Tax Collector, went home justified before God. The Pharisee was wasting his time and breath in the temple. This self-righteous Pharisee returned home unjustified in God's sight, still filled with false pride, false righteousness, and still condemning others. The irony here is that his trip to the temple made him more in need of the atoning sacrifice than ever before.

Our challenge is to achieve humility in a world that seldom respects or recognizes this as an important spiritual value. In fact, most of us are rewarded for bringing attention to ourselves through achievement and increasingly higher levels of performance. We are each very different and have our own crosses to bear and our own challenges. My challenges in achieving humility relate to repression of self-will, giving preference to others instead of self and repression of pride.

As I journey out into the business world each Monday, I find myself in a society and culture that rewards me handsomely for taking care of myself first and to being somewhat prideful about what I do. I know from our discussions that many of you face the same temptations.

Humility or humbleness is a quality of being courteously respectful of others. It is the opposite of aggressiveness, arrogance, boastfulness, and vanity. Rather than, "Me first", humility allows us to say, "No, you first, my friend." Humility is the quality that lets us go more than halfway to meet the needs and demands of others.

Humility as a virtue is a major theme of both the Old and New Testaments. Why do qualities such as courtesy, patience and deference have such a prominent place in the Bible? It is because a demeanor of humility is exactly what is needed to live in peace and harmony with all persons. Humility dissipates anger and heals old wounds. Humility allows us to see the dignity and worth of all God's people. Humility distinguishes the wise leader from the arrogant power-seeker. Acting with humility does not in any way deny our own self worth. Rather, it affirms the inherent worth of all persons. Some would consider humility to be a psychological malady that interferes with "success." However, wealth, power or status gained at the expense of others brings only anxiety -- never peace and love.

I believe that prayer, being in communion with God, is the only way to effectively resist the temptation to self-centeredness and prideful actions. We are most assuredly unable to resist temptation and practice humility in the absence of a close relationship with our Creator God.

Like the tax collector, we need to begin the trek toward humility by confessing our sins to God and begging mercy. God, be merciful to me, a sinner, says the Tax Collector. I can think of no stronger expression of humility than confessing one's sins and begging mercy.

As we come to our Lord's Table to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, let us bring those things that trouble us, those temptations we face, leave them at the table and ask for God's mercy.

God is waiting for that moment so that He might exalt you.

Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Ed Fuller at: efuller@stphilipscathedral.org