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## *The Pharisee is a Sitting Duck*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Proper 25C**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

*The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people, the tax collector, standing far off, prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." -Luke 18:9-14*

The Pharisee is a sitting duck.

You have all probably heard this parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector before. It is one of those extraordinarily easy-to-understand parables. "The one who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles herself will be exalted." Last week, when we read it as our devotional at a chapter meeting, one person said: "Well, that's one saying of Jesus that does not need explanation!"

But I am here this morning to do just that, to explain this parable, or, at least, to elaborate on it. And here is my explanation: "The Pharisee is a sitting duck."

Even if you have never been duck hunting, I hope you know what a sitting duck is. He is the one swimming alone in the middle of the pond, preening and quacking and honking. Her arrogance and complacency are so evident, that one hardly needs to point her out.

The sitting duck is a very easy target. The Pharisee is a very easy target! In fact, it is hard to preach against the Pharisee without sounding like a Pharisee oneself.

Let me say that again. It is hard to preach against the Pharisee without sounding like a Pharisee oneself.

Especially from a pulpit like this one! Look at me, standing up here above the rest of the congregation. I am trying to speak loud so that this expansive room will hear me. But the louder I get, the more I will inevitably sound like a Pharisee. The preacher ends up looking like a pretty easy target, too.

The sitting duck Pharisee is the voice that makes the entire Church look like such an easy target. And the Christian Church sure has been shot at in recent years. The books of outspoken atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens are wild shotgun blasts. They take aim at the sins of institutional religion, and those sins are easy to hit. Those sins are sitting ducks. It is the sitting duck Pharisees who Hitchens and Dawkins take such easy pot shots at; and the Church in its error can be exceedingly loud.

Listen to the Pharisee shout so loudly about what he is against. "I am not a thief, a rogue, or an adulterer," he claims. Consider what happens when any one of us begins to make a list of what we are not. When one begins to make such a list, the list takes on energy of its own. The list refuses to stop. The Pharisee begins to catalog all those people whom he is not like, until finally, he claims that he is not like this tax-collector, this government worker.

Yet, this tax-collector is the one who is praying with him in the temple! The Pharisee, honking so cheerfully about who he is not like, finally admits that he is separated even from his fellow-worshipper. The Pharisee is all alone.

The ultimate sin of the Pharisee is that he separates himself. He separates himself from humanity one category at a time. He finally separates himself even from the poor soul who is worshipping with him that day. The more the Pharisee separates himself from humanity, the more he separates himself from God.

The more we separate ourselves from others, the farther we are from God. The more we refuse contact, refuse conversation, refuse interaction, the more we separate ourselves from our fellow brothers and sisters on this earth, the more we separate ourselves from God.

The sitting duck Church defines itself by what it is not. And when any community of faith does that, the pond shrinks. The community grows smaller and smaller.

The Pharisee is a sitting duck. But there is something worse than a sitting duck. Where I come from, there is one thing worse than someone who is so self-assured and arrogant. The one thing worse than a sitting duck is someone who shoots a sitting duck. You don't shoot a sitting duck. The sport is in the hunt, the wait, the bird in the air, the proper calculation of barrel and trigger, the moment, the shoot. It is not civilized to shoot a sitting duck!

That is why it is hard to speak so vociferously against the Pharisee! As soon as I point out the sin of the Pharisee, I run the risk of becoming a sitting duck myself. Jesus solves the problem by speaking so eloquently in parables. When he merely puts forward the two expressions of faith, it is rather easy to see who is justified.

This age is a confusing time in Church history. The Church is being shot at, attacked, from the outside -which might be understandable""but the Church is also being shot from the inside! The Church is being attacked even by those who claim to have separated themselves out. "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other people, like rogues, or even like those poor Episcopalians,"

Why such commotion and schism from inside our own community of faith? "Lord, have mercy!" This is deep water to swim in, and these are strong winds to fly against! This age in Church history needs neither the loud honking of the sitting duck nor the loud shotgun blasts from those who are shooting sitting ducks. "Lord, have mercy!"

Yes, that's it. That is the other Christian sound these days. "Lord, have mercy." It is the voice of a prayer that just may be the oldest Christian prayer there is.

It is the deep and humble prayer of someone who feels a bit left out, the ordinary Christian, who is not being interviewed by every newspaper and television station, someone who finds it hard to swim in this deep water. It is the humble prayer of someone who cannot fly in such gusty conditions. It is the prayer of the ordinary Christian, the tax-collector, and the government worker: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

That prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," does not have to be loud to be effective. It has been prayed softly, way out in the back of the church, for centuries now. It has been the silent prayer of our souls when we could not sleep in the middle of the night. It has been prayed in hospital rooms across this city and across the world.

Men and women have wailed that prayer after the most horrifying of experiences. "Lord, have mercy!" In the middle of hurricanes and floods and wildfires, the simplest prayer of all time is also the most effective: "Lord, have mercy."

Early in Christian history, the words soon became "Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." They became the opening words of solemn Christian liturgy. Later, they were set to music in the great "Kyries" of the masses of Johann Sebastian Bach.

In old Russia, a lonely monk wanted to learn how to follow the instructions of First Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." How can one pray without ceasing? He learned that he could pray while he breathed in and out, with a prayer that

we now know as "the Jesus Prayer."

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,  
Have mercy on me, a sinner."

The monks of ancient Greece used that prayer, and contemplative saints use that Jesus Prayer today. If anyone today is just learning to pray, you have all you need in this Jesus Prayer, in this prayer of the tax collector, "God, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

Over time, the sound of that prayer is louder than the shotguns of attack and arrogance. And that prayer is always more powerful than the honking of sitting ducks. "Lord, have mercy."

This is the prayer of authenticity and truth; and authenticity and truth are the marks of humility. Remember, to "humble oneself" does not mean to demean oneself or to grovel. The word "humble" comes from the same word as "humus," which means "good dirt." Humus is good and fertile soil, from which grows the mightiest of God's creation.

To humble oneself, then, means to be close to good dirt. To humble oneself means to be down to earth, realistic, and truth-telling; one might even say "well-grounded." When we know how to tell the truth about ourselves, when we learn how much we have in common with all of God's creation, when we accept our common identity with all our brothers and sisters, then we are that much closer to learning the truth about God.

Finally, the reward of humility is not exaltation, as if exaltation were the opposite of humility. The reward and result of humility is honesty itself. The fruit of humility is the power of truth itself, the sheer joy of truth. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," and that mercy will enable us to fly. That divine mercy will cause our souls to soar. It will transport us on the wings of heaven.

AMEN.

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