
Just — Not Like Other People? Lord Have Mercy!

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 25 – Year C

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

Yep. I get this part of the Bible very clearly. I follow the sentiment of Mark Twain, when he was talking about the Bible one day. He said, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

Most of us have probably heard this story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. Two men go into the temple to pray. One man is a steady religious-type, from a prestigious and well-off family; he reminds God that he is doing all the right things, and he thanks God that he's just – he's just not like other people. The other man in the temple works in the tax collection office, for the government, never a popular job with your neighbors; he simply prays for God to have mercy on him.

This 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.”

Okay, I get it. I understand this part of the Bible. And so, I want to give thanks today, too. I want my prayer to be, “Thank you, God. Thank you so much. O God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee.”

Oops.

How easy it would be to say that! Oh, I thank God that I am not like that Pharisee. Of course, as soon as we say that, we have missed the entire point of the parable! One of the most easily interpreted parables in the New Testament may be this one, and it sets us up for a fall.

I wonder if, in this little parable, Jesus is setting us up. Jesus sure sets the Pharisee up – to be a sitting duck, an obvious and easy target for our criticism. It's easy to notice the arrogance of the Pharisee, then to compare ourselves to the arrogance of the Pharisee, and then begin to feel comfortable and justified. Well, as soon as do that, it is we who begin to exalt ourselves. It is we who become the easy target. It is we who who are sitting ducks.

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. His arrogance and complacency are so evident, that one hardly needs to point him out.

The sitting duck is a very easy target. The Pharisee is a very easy target! But, it is hard to speak against the Pharisee without sounding like a Pharisee oneself. Let me say that again. I believe it is a primary point of this parable: It is hard to speak against the Pharisee without sounding like a Pharisee oneself.

I wonder if Jesus knows how people will interpret this parable in ages to come – that, inevitably, we in the church will thank God that we are not like other people. We are not like this group, or that group, or this political faction, or that interest group. And we will do the same in our countries, thanking God that we are not like that other country, or this

foreigner, or that nation. I thank you, God, that my country is not like other countries.

Listen to the Pharisee shout so loudly about what he is *against*. “I am not a thief, a rogue, or an adulterer,” he claims. But, consider what happens when any one of us begins to make a list of what we are not. When we start to make such a list, the list takes on an 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.

Yet, this tax-collector is the one who is praying with him in the temple! The Pharisee, quacking 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 very soul who is worshipping with him that day. The more the Pharisee separates himself from humanity, the more he separates himself from God. He is completely out of relationship.

Yes, 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 the hunter who shoots at 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 and movement. It is not civilized to shoot a sitting duck!

And 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 prayer, it is rather easy to see who is justified. For Jesus, the justified person, the righteous person, is the one who is in right relationship. Once again, the best definition of what it means to be righteous is to be in relationship. To be just, to be justified, is to be in relationship. By definition, “self-righteousness” means to be in relationship only with oneself, and thus, not to be in real relationship at all. Lord, have mercy.

“Lord, have mercy” says the tax collector. That simple prayer emerges from the person who seems excluded, left out of relationship, but, who—in that prayer—unites himself with all of God’s people across time, and across space.

“Lord, have mercy.” Yes, this is the deep prayer of someone who feels a bit left out, the ordinary Christian, who is not being interviewed by every television station, whose comments are not being tweeted or posted on Facebook, 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 left-out tax-collector: “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.

But men and women have also 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 (and of Maurice Duruflé, whose music we will worship with, next week).

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.” When life seems to have left you out, “Lord, have mercy” acknowledges our need.

“Those who humble themselves will be exalted.” But it’s not mere exaltation that results from that prayer. The reward of humility is not exaltation, as if exaltation were the opposite of humility. The reward of humility is relationship. Ultimately, this parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector is about relationship. Because that’s what righteousness is; it is relationship, right relationship.

Remember the very opening lines of this passage? Jesus told this parable “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). The reason the Pharisee was not righteous was because he was not in relationship, and he was proud and thankful that he was not in relationship. “I thank you God,” he said, “that I am not like other people.”

Those are the words of someone out of relationship. Someone who is a sitting duck, out alone on the water, out of community.

We have all been there. Maybe some of us are there right now. “Lord, have mercy on us.”

Just—“Lord have mercy.” That is the prayer that places us in relationship with other people. It is the prayer that unites us with thousands who have come before us and thousands around us. Yes, it even unites us with sinners. It is the prayer that unites us with God. And, right relationship is, indeed, exquisite exaltation.

AMEN.

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