
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
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It sounds like the beginning of a joke, doesn't it? "Two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector, went up to the Temple to pray." Of course, having heard this parable before, and being no strangers to sermons on it, we know the punch line already: the Pharisee is going to end up looking like a heel, because, well, he's a Pharisee, and that's how these stories go. Not always, mind you, but often enough that we tend to brush all Pharisees with the same caricatured stroke: hypocritical, legalistic, and self-righteous.

However, that wasn't the case for Jesus' first listeners. When they heard the opening, they likely anticipated that it was the tax collector who would be the butt of the joke. Remember, tax collectors were rich, powerful, and tight with the party in power—that is, the Roman occupiers, for whom they collected taxes. From their own people. Often overcharging and skimming a personal profit off the top. Needless to say, that did not endear them to first-century Jews.

Jesus' first listeners would have seen in the Pharisee not the posterchild of hypocrisy or legalism, but the member of a respected and sincere sect, who earnestly sought to follow the Torah, as God commanded, with their whole heart, soul, mind, and body. And they would have heard in his prayer echoes of other Jewish prayers, and psalms of thanksgiving and petition. In Psalm 17, for example, the psalmist grounds his request for divine aid on his having no wickedness in him, and having avoided the violent ways of others.

So it would have been a big surprise that the tax collector went home justified. But the surprise is largely lost on us because we already know the moral of the story: *Be like the tax collector, not the Pharisee. Pray like the tax collector, not the Pharisee. Be humble, not proud. Don't judge. Don't brag. Be quick to acknowledge your shortcomings, beat your breast, and ask for mercy.*

Before you know it, we've got yet another set of rules about prayer, which only makes people like me more anxious about it, and perhaps less honest and authentic in it. Before you know it, we have yet another list of do's and don't's, promising to guarantee our own justification, and to protect us from looking like those wrong-headed, self-righteous, impossible or deluded *others*. You can fill in the blank there. *Thank God I'm not arrogant like that. Thank God we aren't like them. We are humble and open-minded and loving. We know how to worship. We know to understand the facts, and vote.*

Oops. I just sounded a lot like the caricature of the Pharisee, didn't I? It's like a default setting that keeps coming back, no matter how many times I try to reset. This judging, stereotyping, comparing, and separating is a tendency that runs deep and wide. It's even baked into the way Christians have read, interpreted, and translated this parable. Even though the parable itself exposes and challenges it.

We are accustomed to the translation we heard just now: "This man, the tax collector, went down to his home justified, rather than the other." That *"rather than"* conveniently plays into this default setting and sets us off and running, to figure out what the tax collector did right, to justify his being justified—and what the pharisee did wrong, to justify his apparent condemnation. All with an eye to avoiding the pharisee's fate ourselves!

But it also could be translated: "This one went home justified, alongside the other." The preposition is *"para,"* the root we find in "parallel," "paramount," "paralegal," and "parable"! It can mean "rather than," but also can mean "alongside, beside."

What if "the tax collector went home justified, alongside the pharisee?" Like Jesus' first listeners, we are

compelled to take another look—this time with a relational lens that takes connection for granted, rather than an individualistic one. When we do, we find that the tax collector and pharisee are not so different, after all. They're both in the temple; both praying; both sounding like certain psalms. They are both standing apart, by themselves, as if they weren't connected to others.... Even though they are praying *alongside* each other, to the same God, in the same temple. Both prayers, and both people who pray them, belong to God and to this holy place. Both, together, are justified, or made righteous--restored to right relationship.

And both are needed. They need each other's perspective and prayer and example. Their prayers, along with their righteousness, or salvation or wholeness, are bound to and encompass others'. What each of them gets right is for the good of the other, also.

It's easy to see how the pharisee needs the tax collector's humility and simple prayer for mercy. But the tax collector also benefits from the pharisee's prayer and presence. At a moment when the tax collector seems to feel incapable of good works or gratitude or pride--of lifting his face up to God, the Pharisee does it for him. The Pharisee shows him that it is possible.

Pride gets a bad rap in many Christian circles. But it's not always a bad thing! After all, this month, we celebrate pride. Gay pride. Last Sunday, we celebrated with a gay pride parade. We celebrate that people who have been shamed more often than celebrated, and who may have internalized some of that shame, can be proud—boldly proud—of who they are.

Pride can be a way of saying, "God created me, too, and called me good." Pride can be a way of receiving and celebrating God's gifts, in ourselves and others. And pride, good and healthy pride, feels good! I am so proud of my children; and I haven't outgrown wanting to make the people I love proud. Every now and then, by the grace of God, I find that I can be proud of myself. For some of us, that does not come easily.

Yes, pride can be distorted, sinful even, when it separates you from God or others. When it leads to putting yourself in the place of God, or imagining that you are superior to and therefore different from others.

But isn't much of that also true of shame or self-loathing, or exaggerated humility? It, too, buys into the illusion of a hierarchy of worthiness. It, too, imagines some fundamental difference between yourself and others. It, too, leads to separation from others and God. And it, too, places more faith in ourselves--in what we have done or not done, what we believe is good or bad about us--than in God's grace.

Today, at least, I don't think this is a parable about pitting humility against pride, or about determining who's right, or justified, and who isn't. It's about God. It's about God, who hears all our prayers, regardless of how proper they are. It's about God, who seeks right relationship with all of us, and among us; and who makes us part of one another's healing and wholeness.

And if God is not about the business of sorting us out into good or bad, in or out, justified or not, then maybe, just maybe, we don't need to be either. Maybe we could turn all that energy and attention away from how we measure up against one another, and toward God, whose grace meets us all.