
I Thank God That I Am Not The Guy On The Bridge

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: 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*

Today is a day when I remember the comedian, Emo Philips. He told a story many years ago, which bears repeating today. He tells the story like this.

I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it! Don't do it!" He said, "Why not? Nobody loves me."

I said, "Well, God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "I do, too. ...Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

He said, "I'm a Christian." I said, "Me, too! ...Protestant; or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! ...What franchise?"

He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Baptist; or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Conservative Baptist, or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region; or Northern Conservative Baptist, Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!...

Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879; or Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

I thank God that I am not like that guy on the bridge.

I thank God that I am not like that Pharisee.

Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector like this: 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 praying there 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.

The Pharisee is indeed praying. The Pharisee is actually offering thanks. But his prayer reminds us that not every prayer is good! He is thanking God for what he is not. "I thank you, God," he says, "that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." In those words, the Pharisee is gradually, name by name, separating himself from people, just like the ostensibly religious guy on the bridge.

Finally, the Pharisee has said, "even like this tax collector." The Pharisee has separated himself even from the person praying in the temple with him. Then, Jesus says that the tax collector, whose simple prayer was, "Lord, have mercy," goes back to his home justified, rather than the Pharisee.

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.

The Pharisee is such 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, in the same room as he was.

In the same way, the guy on the bridge went through every tiny religious distinction he could, until he identified what separated him from the guy about to jump from the bridge. When he pushed the poor fellow off the bridge, he was 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. The Pharisee is all alone. He is completely out of relationship. At the end of all such lists, all we have left is ourselves. And we are all alone.

Yes, as soon as I point out the sin of the Pharisee, I, too, have separated myself.

This eloquent parable is really about who is righteous. Remember how the story begins? The story begins by saying that Jesus told this parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Luke 18.9). Two different forms of prayer give us two different attempts to be righteous. For Jesus, the justified person, the righteous person, is the one who is in right relationship. I remind us 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 and erratic 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 and wars, 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 Gabriel Faure, whose Requiem we will sing next Sunday, All Saints Sunday.

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 of today use that Jesus Prayer. 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." However! However, 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.

Yes, remember how Jesus began this story, that he told it "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 even 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.

Okay, we have all been there. Maybe some of us are there right now. "Lord, have mercy on us."

Just pray: "Lord have mercy." That is the prayer that places us in relationship with other people. It is the awesome 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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