

This one is a bit like the Irishman and the Englishman joke! A Pharisee and a tax collector walk into a temple. The Pharisee stands before the altar and prays, with palms up to Heaven and raised eyes: “God, thank you that I’m so righteous. You have blessed me and made me holy in your eyes.” Here he pauses to shoot a glance over at his money-grubbing friend, “Thank you that I am not like those wicked men who would steal the coin of others.” And then he sweeps up his robe and leaves, with a self-assured smirk of contempt.

Meanwhile, the tax collector hasn’t moved, but has stood off to the side, with shaking hands and downcast eyes. Finally, he gathers his courage, strikes his chest, and breaks his silence with a trembling voice, “God, have mercy on me, for I am an unclean sinner.” He has no other words, for no other words will cover his guilt and shame.

As Jesus wraps up his story, he offers those wonderful words, “I tell you that (the tax collector), rather than (the Pharisee), went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Everybody listening looks around knowingly, as if they had heard the punch line to some great and insightful joke at the expense of someone else. Doubtless they shot glances over at the religious elite and thought to themselves, “What a self-righteous group of men.” After all, Jesus was targeting them; those who were confident of their own righteousness were those who inspired the story. Even today, we hear sermons preached on the topic, and go out thinking, “What a wicked Pharisee; God, thank you that I’m not a Pharisee.”

Therein lays the grand joke. By judging the Pharisee, we have made ourselves into the very thing we are disdaining. We condemn the Pharisee for pride, and exalt ourselves over him for our humility. No doubt the Story-Teller knew this, although many of his followers surely did not. Even today, many are left laughing at the joke, but they have missed the punch line.

Although centuries of Christian interpretation have led us to think of Pharisees as the bad guys, this is not fair. They are often presented as Jesus’ opponents in the gospels, but we need to remember that they were society’s

good people. They were dependable, honest, upright, good neighbours, contributors to the community. Quite frankly, they were the type of folks we would all like to have as members of our parishes. The Pharisee is a man at home in the temple. He says his prayers. He gives more than he must. Although the tithe on income was standard, he tithes on everything he has, and many people would have benefited from his generosity.

He stands in the correct posture for prayer in the temple, arms raised and head lifted. But – and this is a big but – in his prayer, he has nothing to ask of God. He's basically giving God a progress report. As far as he can tell, he's got it all under control, and he's happy about it: "God I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, unrighteous folks, adulterers, or even like that tax collector over there."

Meanwhile, standing off at a distance, is the tax collector. He has got nothing to show for himself, and he knows it. He earned his living by working for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people. For years, he has collected high taxes from his Jewish neighbours to give to the Roman government. He gives the Romans their flat rate, and makes his money by charging an excess and keeping it for himself. Basically, he is a crook, a traitor, and a lowlife. He is guilty and he knows it. We don't know why his guilt has got the better of him today, but there he is in the temple, full of remorse, beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." He doesn't even promise to shape up. All he does is ask for God's mercy.

The Pharisee hasn't met up with God. This tax-collector, on the other hand, right away finds the correct posture before God: the attitude of one who has nothing and needs everything. He doesn't even take the time to confess his faults in detail. He knows himself as a sinner. From that conscience wells up his prayer: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

The Pharisee, who gives a wonderful performance in the temple, goes home empty. He came asking nothing of God and he goes home getting nothing from God. The tax collector, despicable fellow that he is, shows up empty handed asking for God's mercy, and goes home justified, that is, in right relationship with God.

We may hear this parable as a lesson on humility: don't be proud like the Pharisee; go home and be humble like the tax collector. And just like that, we fall into a trap. We take a parable about God's amazing, unconditional grace and acceptance, and turn it into a story about how we can earn or merit God's love. We've got the answer now. If we can just be humble like the tax collector and not be puffed up with pride like the Pharisee, then God will accept us and love us. We may even find ourselves praying, "God, I thank thee that I am not like the Pharisee."

The trap is to ask the wrong question of this parable. It's that distorted question "What can I do to be worthy of your love?" But if we ask the right question, the question "Do you love me?" then the parable gives us an answer. To the question "Do you love me?" God replies resoundingly and forever "Yes."

The only thing we need to do is open ourselves to that love and return it. Everything else is a veil before our eyes, thrown up by our culture, our career, and our churches. All self-flattery and self-importance and self-righteousness ends in futility. When we stop reciting our resumes in the temple, the incarnate love of God meets us and embraces us, saying I know your pain, my beloved, and I forgive your sins. I know your emptiness, and I will fill it and I will fill you with my melting love.

The fact is, everybody is not morally equal, and the Pharisee was a better person, morally, socially, and, no doubt, personally, than the tax collector: and you must admit that all of this counts for something. To live a morally upright life is better than not to do that. To fast, pray, and give is better than not to do those things. To live as God calls us to live is better than not to live that way. We believe that; and we should never forget that. To live as God calls us to live is to live richer, deeper, and more complete lives. We are not all equal, and it does make a difference. Our lives can be better than they are now.

There is only one place where we are all equal; and the ground at the foot of the cross is levelling. To stand there, which is where we stand when we stand before God, is to stand without difference, and without advantage, and without any prayer but one: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

The primary reason this is true is not because of who we are; the primary reason we only have that one prayer is because of who God is. When we stand at the foot of the cross, when we stand in the presence of God, we are not visiting Santa at the department store! Rather, we are in the presence of a God who is righteous, who is holy and who is just; a God who demands of us righteousness, holiness, and justice, and gives us his unconditional love. Of course, he loves you! Our correct response is to give thanks -

Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world. John Milton

We really must look at God as a child would, and recover some of that sense of the numinous – that mystery. We are in the presence of a God who has made for us as great a sacrifice as we can imagine, and who says that we should do the same sort of thing. When we stand before God, we stand before the creator of the universe, the giver of the law, and the judge of all people.

If we but take that reality seriously, it takes the air right out of our self-righteous comparisons and our self-serving compromises. If that Pharisee were standing before anyone of us, his litany of good qualities might really impress us. But that is not where he was standing. That is not where any of us is standing.

The more honest we are about who God is, and so about who we are in the presence of God, the more that tax collector's prayer makes sense, the more it becomes our prayer. "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

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