

Scripture**Luke 18: 9-14****(The Message)**

⁹⁻¹² He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’”

¹³ “Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

¹⁴ Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

Two people go to church to pray. One goes home in a right relationship with God. The other does not. Why? That is the question at the heart of the parable that Jesus tells in today's scripture. And don't we all want to go home today in a right relationship with God? So, this parable is worth spending time with today.

It is a parable that is designed to teach us about worship and prayer. In fact, it is the only parable that Jesus tells that takes place *in* a house of worship, *in the temple*. When you think about it, most of his parables take place in the fields, or in houses, or along the road. This one, and only this one, takes place in the temple. So, it teaches us about worship and prayer.

And it also shows us what it means to be made right with God. We will often sum up the gospel by saying that we are made right by grace through faith. And this parable teaches us just what that means. This can teach us a lot, about worship, about prayer, and about the very heart of the gospel: Making it right with God.

So, in our parable, we have two men, both of the same community, and both praying at the same time, in the same place. But they are very different people. One is a Pharisee, a group that is known to be dedicated to their religion. Respected in their community; known for their study of God's Word, and for their diligence in living out God's commandments. The other is a tax collector, a group that is among the least respected in their community, often considered traitors to their people.

The question that this story tempts us to ask is, how can we be more like the tax collector? But here is the tricky part of this parable. Because when we ask what we have to do to make it right, we are really asking the question that the Pharisees asked., what to *do* to be right before God, Rather, it's really teaching us that it is *not* what we *do* that puts us in a right relationship with God...

- It is our *attitude* before God.
- It is who we are in the presence of God.
- It is our humility before God.

When we go back to the setting of this parable, we find out that Jesus is telling it to those: "*who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*"

Now, I am pretty sure that none of us here would say that we trust in ourselves to be right. But under the surface of what Jesus is saying, I think, is that we all can be tempted to think that we can be good enough without God's help. We all have some control issues, going back to Adam and Eve in the garden.

The Pharisee that Jesus describes in this parable is a little exaggerated, perhaps. It's really just to show us where that attitude leads. It leads to a prayer that we would never say aloud and that we might say in our hearts: "God, I thank you that I am not like those people," whoever **those people** are. "I do all of these things for you, God, not like some people."

That is essentially the Pharisee's prayer, but is that even a prayer? It kind of makes me think of a person trying to convince someone to hang out with them because, "hey, I have a nice car, and a great job, and I work out every day, so you'd be lucky to be a part of my posse."

Does that ever work? I hope not! That is certainly **not** how the community of love works. You don't get someone to love you by listing your accomplishments. So why would that work with God?

And aren't we *thankful* that's not how it works with God. Because we can't impress God with our brains or with our money or with our looks. God doesn't care about how smart we are, or how wealthy we are, or how well we are living our life right now.

The truth is that God already loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And all that God *really* wants is to open our hearts and accept God's love. That's what God truly wants. That's what will make it right.

In my role as a pastor, I have been privileged to have many people share their pain with me, their brokenness, their cracks. It has led me to believe that the only people who don't have broken hearts are simply hiding their cracks, their brokenness. No one gets through this life completely untouched by suffering and tragedy.

And we can be tempted to hide from it. The Pharisee in this parable is hiding from it. He is comparing himself to others who seem less worthy of God's love. He is making himself feel better or "feel right" by doing that.

Isn't that what we do with gossip, reality shows, and social media, and the like? We look at other people's problems, and focus on them, to avoid dealing with our own stuff. When we see people struggling with their issues, we sometimes can't help but be thankful that we are not like them. And when we do that, we are once again being the Pharisee in today's parable.

God wants us to be real with Godself. And to open our minds and hearts to God. When we do that, we are giving God something that can actually work with the possibility of making it right.

When we bring our broken spirits, our broken hearts to God; barely daring to look to heaven and beg for God's mercy; then we are giving God something that can make it right. We are letting God in, and that is where the healing takes place. And that healing, and that love, and that mercy, is what will send us home in a right relationship with God. And maybe even in a right relationship with ourselves. That openness is what will send us home...

- Right with God
- Right with ourselves
- Right to share grace and mercy with the world that we have been given.

Isn't that exactly what our world needs right now? Our world doesn't need more Pharisees, justifying themselves, comparing themselves, judging others, hiding their brokenness and pain. Our world needs people who know they are broken, and who bring it to God, and who go home with clean hearts and with new and right spirits.

Our world needs people who have found joy in their salvation again. Our world needs us to bring our humble, contrite hearts to God; and to be healed; and then to go and heal our hurting world. And that is really what this parable is all about. It is all about having our broken hearts healed, by letting God in. And then, in return, making it right in healing our broken world.

Let us pray...from Psalm 51

- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Amen!