

Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

July 15, 2012

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Jesus told lots of stories. It was his favorite way of teaching his followers. In our Bible we have 57 parables that are recorded. Every gospel includes a large group of these stories. The only thing we have more of is psalms. Parables were important to Jesus and essential to his message. This summer our worship theme is the parables of Jesus. When we decided to use the parables as our worship theme, all of your ministers smiled, because we knew we'd have interesting stories to preach on. We also knew we'd never run out of material. There are so many parables that we could use this theme every summer for 6 years, but never run out of material.

The other reason that Heike and Jamie and I warmed to the idea of preaching from the parables is because the stories are brain teasers. They challenge you to think. They fly in the face of logic. Though many people have written books about the parables no one really knows what they mean. So, 2000 years later, they still are fresh and intriguing. They help you confront your assumptions. They cause you to reflect on your life. They raised more questions than they answered. Today's parable is no exception. Two people went up to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. Now, the story hinges on your impressions of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Pharisee – Now who were the Pharisees?. What was their mission? Now it is hard for us to be objective about the Pharisees, the Bible tells us that Jesus was often debating with the Pharisees. The New Testament includes countless examples of moments when Jesus confronted the Pharisees, so we assume they were “bad guys”.

In fact, the Pharisee were not evil or even misguided. They were reformers who were trying to make things better. (Jesus did not think they were going far enough, but that tells you as much about Jesus as it does about them.) For several hundred years before Jesus was born, Israel was a land full of conflict. Some of the problems emerged when Greece dominated the area, and people in Israel argued about whether to go along with the Hellenists, or whether to remain Jewish Separatists, insulated from Greek influence. People at the Temple argued about worship; traditionalists argued with those who favored updating worship from time to time. But the big conflict was a class war, between the rich ruling class, and the vast majority of common people.

The Pharisees emerged as a group of leaders who were trying to work for a more unified Israel. They were well-educated, and very devout, but they did not all identify with the upper class. Appalled at the exclusive way that the Temple priests catered to the rich, the Pharisees sought to include the needs and concerns of the common people – day laborers, and craftspeople. They mingled with the crowds in Jerusalem, and listened to the plight of the poor. They hoped to build alliances across the class divide. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee. In Jesus' day they were the brightest and the best.

What about the Tax Collector? Tax collectors are never popular in any society. But here in our society we just assume that they are doing their job. They are not evil people. In Christ's day, it was very different. The Romans had a way of putting their knee on the necks of the people they conquered. They did it by instituting cruel administrative procedures. They recruited Israelites to take the taxes, and did not pay them, but condoned their graft. The taxes were steep enough without having to pay extra to support Israelites who had decided to take advantage of things and lay hard fees on top of Rome's oppressive tax laws. Tax collectors were viewed as opportunistic traitors.

Jesus tells a story about a Pharisee whom everyone would have admired, but he prayed with great pride, and disdain for others. Then he describes a tax collector whom everyone hated, but his prayers were humble and real. What is Jesus saying here?

**In the first place, Don't judge people by their appearances.** When the people heard the Pharisee was going to pray, they would have been smiling to themselves. Everyone would like to hear his inspiring conversation with God. But Jesus describes a man who regales God with details about his own virtue, and reveals his disdain for others.

When the people heard that a tax collector went to the temple to pray, they would have been full of disgust. How can someone who cheats his fellow man, and profits from our oppression even dare to come into God's house to pray? What hypocrisy for this man to approach the very God whose people he abuses with his chosen profession! Jesus says – don't judge people by their appearances. Look deeper. Strive to see their heart. If you only look at the surface you might be fooled by some superficial people who look good on the outside but are pretty shallow. You might miss people who you have written off, as enemies; yet they are really good hearted.

This is part of Christ's point in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When Jesus lived, everybody hated the Samaritans. The Samaritans were opportunistic neighbors to the North. They cheered for Israel's enemies, and undermined Israel's success at every turn. For Christ's disciples, there were no **Good Samaritans; the very term was an oxymoron.** Yet Jesus told this famous parable about a Samaritan who was so good and gracious, that he distinguished himself with his kindness. His character was so exemplary that it outshone that of the temple priests. The Good Samaritan's actions served as a rebuke to the actions of Levites and the Pharisee, who did not always have time to be kind to strangers.

Jesus told another story about someone who surprised people. It is a story that the children learned about in Bible Village - a famous tax collector named Zacchaeus. He was hated by the people in

Jericho because he had defrauded many when he came to collect their taxes. But he was also a short man so he climbed a tree to hear Jesus. Right there the Bible warns you that there is more to Zacchaeus than his job. He is curious about Jesus and someone with his own human foibles. Jesus saw more than a tax collector in that tree. He saw someone who was conflicted about his job, and sorry for being so greedy. Jesus did not write him off. Jesus could see that Zacchaeus was not happy and was eager to change, if anyone gave him half a chance. That day, Jesus reached out to the hurting human being behind the tax collector. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner and changed the life of someone who was lonely, and shunned by others.

Jesus encourages us to see the person behind the mask when we look at one another. How do we explain the deep and compelling friendships that blossom between people who belong to different camps? I have always been intrigued by the bond in the Senate between Senator Orin Hatch a leading Republican and Senator Ted Kennedy a leading Democrat? Both so loyal to different parties and opposite political agendas, but also loyal to a friendship neither could explain away. Sometimes it is those moments when we see one another as human in spite of all that would divide us that life's treasures unfold. Since 9/11 there have been a number of unusual friendships between Muslims and Americans, between Jews and Palestinians. This week I started to read a book you may have seen entitled – The Faith Club – the story of three women, one Muslim, one Christian, and one Jewish. They lived in New York City after 9/11 and they grew close to better understand each other. This friendship changed their lives. These deep connections can be transformative because unlikely friendships often push us to see a human being behind a label, a person behind a religion or nationality. **Don't judge by appearances.**

**Finally, when you pray, come clean. Jesus says, you don't have to try to impress God. You don't have to try too hard at all.** The Pharisee was trying to impress God.

We are in the middle of several personnel searches at the church this summer, so I have been looking at lots of resumes. What I have learned is that resumes only go so far. They really only tell you if you want to learn more. They help you see a summary or get a short glimpse of the candidate. But a resume that is too long seems silly or puffed up. A resume that seems too good to be true, probably is just that. When you search for a new employee you really want to get to know the person, to see the man or woman who is really behind the resume.

When you pray, God just wants to hear what you think - not what you've done. God does not want to hear your resume. Our need to impress just puts distance between us and God. We want to tick off our accomplishments because we are insecure. The Tax Collector was too far gone to be insecure. That allowed him to be honest with God. But the Pharisee was all tied up in knots because he could not let his guard down, even when he prayed.

When I talk to my 3 year old granddaughter I try to engage her in conversations where she tells me what she is really thinking. I love those little talks where she explains who she likes and why. Last week she said that she had a new friend at school. She told me candidly that this girl was her best friend, and that the child was special because they could play together and the little girl listened to Ruth. Then she confided that her friend was only 2 yrs old, really just a baby, but still she liked her and thought she was a good friend, even though she was a baby. Those honest conversations where she goes on and on about her day are gems to me. That is what I cherish the most. She cannot impress me; I am already head over heels impressed. When you pray – consider that maybe God loves us like a doting grandparent. That would change how you feel about praying. If you were sitting next to your grandparent, you might be able to sit back and tell God what's on your mind.