

This is our last Sunday in a 7-week series on the theme: *Parables of Grace*. This morning we’re looking at “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector” which, according to Luke, was told “to *some* who trusted in their own righteousness and so regarded others with contempt.” And let me start by saying: “Denial is not a river in Egypt!” We need to admit that even as we claim to be saved by grace alone, we’re often guilty of trusting in our own imputed righteousness -- our own personal salvation experience -- so much that we end up regarding others with contempt!

There is an updated rendition of Jesus’ parable that tells of a bishop and pastor praying near the altar. The bishop prays, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The pastor prays, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Then, from behind, they hear another voice. The bishop and pastor turn to see a janitor, head bowed, praying, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The Bishop turns to the pastor and remarks rather haughtily, “Look at who thinks he’s a sinner!”

Doesn’t that get at the heart of what this parable illustrates? The deep-seated need we seem to have to feel religiously superior -- and thereby elevating ourselves by diminishing others? But of the freedoms grace permits, one freedom is liberation from beliefs and behaviors we might use as an excuse to stand at some distance from those we deem less ‘saved’.

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I think this is one reason many outsiders are increasingly disillusioned with Christianity. In the past, Christians were well regarded by those who were not Christian themselves. But in the last few decades those outside the Church’s fold have lost their positive regard for Christians, in large part because those who profess faith in a humble, merciful, and gracious Savior seem to lack humility, mercy, and grace.

As we explore this parable more closely, I want to offer three suggestions for how we might live more graciously in the freedom of God’s unmerited grace. But before offering these suggestions, we need to notice something about this parable.

In Jesus’ telling of the story, it is important to note that there is no blanket condemnation of the Pharisee. (Indeed, it is likely that he’s living a model religious life.) Nor is there a blanket affirmation of the Tax Collector. (Tax collectors colluded with the Romans to take financial advantage of their own Jewish people.) And so both are said to be praying in a manner consistent with their faith and their vocation. They are both praying in the Temple and they both use words that echo the scriptural phraseology of the Psalms. The Pharisee’s self-extolling prayer is thematically consistent with Psalm 17:1-5 and the Tax Collector’s penitential prayer is consistent with Psalm 51:1-5.

But because Jesus tells us it’s the Tax man and not the Pharisee who departs the Temple ‘justified’, there’s much we may learn about practicing our faith more graciously from these two figures.

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The first thing is the difference between what brings the Pharisee and the Tax Collector to the Temple. By his prayer, we know that one is interested in validating his personal righteousness before God. The other is seeking restored relationships.

While seeking righteousness is not bad per se, the quest for such righteousness -- as we hear in the Pharisee’s prayer -- goes awry because he seeks to establish his worth outside of Divine Love; by his own actions. “The Pharisee’s prayer embodies a way of being in the world that’s devoid of the very relationships which Scripture tells us characterize [God’s kingdom]: love of God and love for neighbor.” How can the Pharisee really love God if he’s so full of himself? How can he really love his neighbors if he only sees their short-comings? (And isn’t it somehow so satisfying to pray for others shortcomings?)

As one author observes, “Self-righteousness blocks our capacity for self-criticism, destroys humility, and undermines the sense of oneness that should bind us all.”

By contrast the Tax Collector knows that sin damages his relationship with both God and neighbor, and so his prayer of contrition reveals a hope that these relationships can be restored.

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Another difference between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is that while the first seeks to live a good religious life, the other is seeking a life of reverence. Again, the goal of living a disciplined religious life is worthwhile. But a disciplined religious life is not an end unto itself. We must be seeking reverence, a head bowed humility, in gratitude for the grace ‘that saves wretches like us’, if we are to avoid being as religiously smug as the Pharisee.

And, by the way, the Latin word for religion is *religio* which means *to bind together*. So again, it is about relationships! In Jesus’ life and ministry, we see that he practices a disciplined religious life, but he binds himself to a community of disciples, beckoning them to live reverent and gracious lives which characterize life in the kingdom of God.

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The third thing to note is that there is a subtle difference between coming before God seeking ‘relief’ or coming before God seeking ‘release.’ It strikes me that the Pharisee is coming to the Temple to dispense of his religious duty, and the content of his prayer indicates that his religion provides him ‘relief from’ dealing with those who aren’t as religious or righteous as he is!

The Tax Collector’s prayer doesn’t have this same flavor. Implicit in his prayer for mercy, is that he’s seeking ‘release’ to re-engage his faith in a more authentic way. I say this because he confesses to being a sinner. And biblically speaking, sin is not primarily a moral category; it is a relational category. The issue with moral failings is how these failures impede our relationship with God and others. To be released from sin, is to be released for relationship with God and neighbor.

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I recall one of my seminary professors pointing out that the Pharisee is the true atheist. Not because he doesn’t believe in God, but because, by his own admission, he doesn’t really need God. And as we’ve seen, the Pharisee is also the most selfish. He does not esteem relationships with other people as a matter of any great importance because he’s secure in his own personal salvation.

And yet this is the opposite of God’s enterprise of salvation in Jesus Christ who came to restore us and make us fit for relationships of love with God and neighbor.

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A good picture of this comes in a story told by Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk and author. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he writes about a moment of personal revelation while standing in a crowded shopping district: “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation. This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: ‘Thank God, thank God, that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others....’”

Merton then says, “It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes terrible mistakes; yet with all that, God gloried in becoming a member of the human race.”

And Jesus tells this parable to invite us is to go beyond seeking righteousness to seeking relationship, to go beyond the practice of religion, by seeking reverence, and to know that grace is not only about relief, it provides release... from a dream of separateness or superiority, so that we can practice our faith in Christ with humility, mercy and grace. Amen.