

TRUE REPENTANCE - LUKE 18:9-14

INTRODUCTION

I remember the first time I visited the new Sacred Heart hospital at RiverBend. It felt posh.. the tall ceiling, the fireplace and grandfather clock, the wide hallways and the vistas visible from the large windows of the cafeteria, hallways, and rooms. “This is too nice” I cynically said, “no wonder our insurance costs are so high,” “it feels like a hotel,” “who needs all this?” and so on and so forth. A year or two later, when my daughter was born, we stayed there. As labor intensified, it didn't feel like being at a hotel on vacation anymore. Later, as I tossed and turned on the couch next to my wife's bed and new daughter's crib, I was grateful they didn't skimp on the cushions, and I began to appreciate the thoughtful approach of those who designed the facility. I think the picture Jesus gives us today in the parable has parallels to a visitor and patient at a hospital. – Two approaches to health (in this case spiritual), two approaches to life and those who share it with us, and two approaches to God, the source of all life.

OUTLINE

I. The Pharisee

- A. **v9: “To some who...”** - The target audience is broad for this parable, and the Pharisee serves as merely a case study into a broader problem in human character. [For while Pharisees looked down on sinners and tax collectors, the Zealots looked down on the Romans, the Romans (their allies the Saducees) looked down on the Jews, and even the disciples themselves asked Jesus to call down fire on the Samaritans.]
- B. **v10: Two go up to pray.**
- i. What do these two have in common?
 - a) Affirm the need for prayer, spiritual disciplines
 - b) They see God as holy, a lover and definer of perfection and beauty, a rewarder of the good, one who hates evil and responds to it justly and perfectly without being inconsistent with any of his other attributes.
 - ii. From initial appearances, the Pharisee is praying quite normally, quite pious. He went up to the temple, maybe as a private devotional practice or a set time (e.g. 9 am, 3 pm), and stood in the proper place to pray, and if like others in his generation, would raise his hands. He started his prayer by thanking God.
- C. So far so good. **What goes wrong?**
- i. **What is missing from his prayer?** Compare it to the ideal given to us in the Lord's Prayer: there's no longing for God's work on earth, petitioning of God for help, no confession of sin, intercession for others, and really, no thanks or praise.
 - ii. **What is the content of his prayer?** It is exactly what verse 9 describes
 - a) **He is confident of his own righteousness.**
 - He prays.
 - His group, the Pharisees were quite pious. People looked up to them spiritually and they had a reputation for being serious about their faith,

though not as extreme as the political zealots. They were conservative, traditional Jews, those who “took the Bible literally” in their day, and not known for compromise. There were set times for prayer in the Jewish day and Pharisees were the most active in these traditions.

- This fellow seems the type of person who would be at church every time the door was open – only a deathly illness would keep him away from worship, and the pastor could always count on him to help out at events and making things happen. I could see this person well-dressed for every event, a member of 5 committees, regularly up front with the worship team, and even getting a little dirty on church yard-work days.
- He can also talk the religious talk – He uses words like justification, sanctification, propinquitous, and postdiluvian. He can distinguish between Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the Lutherans featured on Garrison Keillor. He's great at keeping prayer meetings going (he prays long), can win Bible trivia games (Methuselah lived 782 yrs), tags “God willing” to every promise he makes, and is quick to say “I'll be praying for you,” whether he prays or not. He is a confident self-assured religious guy.
- He tithes
 - He gives at least 10% from all his sources of income, and he can pull out the ledger if you doubt. The church finance committee could count on this guy not only for regular giving, but also to give a bit extra in a pinch. While giving anonymously might be noble, he wouldn't want to be TOO anonymous, and if someone offered to put a plaque with his name on the side of the church building, he wouldn't object.
- He fasts
 - While the Jewish required fast was only the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), devout Jews in his day would fast Monday & Thursday. He does what is expected, and faithfully.

b) He looks down on everyone else.

- He doesn't pray for others (wishing their good), but denigrates them. He thanks God that he's not like them. Now, it's one thing to say “Thank you God I didn't get into trouble – for protecting me from sin.” (e.g. giving into temptations of sexual immorality, drunkenness, theft, or excessive anger) That is not this man's prayer. Here, the Pharisee rejoices that he's a higher class, on a higher spiritual plane, and takes all the credit himself.
- There is a precedent for this in conservative Judaism in an ancient prayer appearing some time before Christ, “Blessed are you... King of the Universe, for not having made me a Gentile... a slave... a woman” (cite?). The Pharisee in this story takes that prayer even further!
- Also, while he gave money to the temple and to the poor, he wouldn't be caught dead associating with them, actually having a conversation with the guy on the street corner asking for a dime, much less helping them in a

relational way.

- iii. He started out coming to God on decent terms. He practiced the three core spiritual disciplines Jesus mentions in the Sermon on the Mount – prayer, fasting, and giving money. He tried to do good, but it turns out so badly. We all know people like this, and if we stopped to think about it, we might find ourselves fitting the mold at times all too easily.

D. v14: But Jesus says, 'No, you're not doing well at all'

- i. Jesus warns:
 - a) Matt 6:1 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
 - b) Matt 23:23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

E. How can we be like the Pharisee?

- i. Even if we're not as brazen as this Pharisee, we can without thinking emulate his attitude of **looking down on others**.
 - a) We might thank God for our blessings, our house, job, our country, food on the table, etc., especially after a mission trip to somewhere like Mexico, Haiti, or the like. But underlying our enhanced attitude at table grace, do we not find sometimes an underlying prayer, “Thank you God I don't have to be poor like that. I might not have that big TV, but I'm not like them. That I don't have to suffer like that because, well, I'm an American and we're pretty awesome.”
 - b) When we hear of religious scandals, whether national ones like Jim Bakker or Catholic abuse scandals, or those that happen here in Eugene, how tempting it is to think, “I'm glad I'm not Catholic in these times,” or “Those TV preachers are at it again,” rather than weeping in prayer for those who have wandered in their faith and for the hurting Christian brothers and sisters, both in leadership and in the pews affected by such evil.
- ii. **Driven by image – we care more about looking good than being good.**
 - a) In the Northwest, we pride ourselves in being casual, in not putting on airs, in being rugged and rough around the edges. Yet we care just as much about our image as East Coast businessmen or Southern belles.
 - b) If we're like the stereotypical righteous of Eugene, we might thank God as we drive our Prius or ride our bike that we only buy food locally and usually organic, are tolerant of all sorts of people and ideas, I give to KLCC or Food for Lane County every time they ask, have at least a few things from Goodwill, faithfully wear my green and yellow during football season and the proper outdoorsy brands the rest of the year, and always buy girl scout cookies when asked.
 - c) If that doesn't describe you, maybe you thank God that you're not one of those big city folk, that you can own a gun, that you drive a truck large enough to actually haul something, that you love your country, and like John Denver, thank “God [you're] a Country Boy.”

- d) There are plenty of stereotypes to be tossed around. **Any good we do**, whether defending our country, our liberties, or the environment, **can be twisted to be used as a false justification that we're OK before God and others.**
- iii. And if our faith is just about ourselves being OK before God, how easy it is to only **pray only for ourselves** and our own needs!
 - a) We might ask for God's help in daily tasks, but do we just pray for ourselves in our situations, or pray for those we will see at the grocery store, those we have to disagree with in the board room, those who will interview us at a job interview, or the neighbor we wave to every day.
 - b) When we read the paper of an arrest, do we pray? When you hear of coworkers or fellow students sleeping around, of marriages falling apart, or people cheating in business or on their taxes, do we pray?
 - c) When was the last time we prayed for our neighbors or wept for their salvation? Do we even know their names?
- iv. How tempting it is for **our faith** to turn into merely a worldview, a socio-political group, a **means to our own ends**, whether power, safety, or comfort
 - a) A week or so ago (10/17), Pope Francis said during a morning mass that Christians can turn their faith into an ideology. An ideology, he explained, makes people hostile and arrogant, and pushes them away from their peers. The root of this is a lack of prayer.
 - b) “In ideologies there is not Jesus: in his tenderness, his love, his meekness. And ideologies are rigid, always. ... And when a Christian becomes a disciple of the ideology, he has lost the faith: he is no longer a disciple of Jesus, he is a disciple of this attitude of thought...”
 - c) “These do not pray [but merely say prayers], abandoning the faith and transforming it into moralistic, casuistic ideology, without Jesus....”
 - d) (<http://www.romereports.com/palio/modules.php?name=AvantGo&file=print&sid=11368>)
- F. Some of us have wrestled with these temptations for years, have seen some growth in our faith, but we still seem to find ourselves in the Pharisee's camp. We have worked hard to have a proper doctrine and worldview, and we read Jesus' teaching repeatedly so that we might please God better. We're good at pleasing others, so naturally that is our approach to God. **Yet the danger is when we strive to please God more than love God.**
 - i. “If I do X, God will be pleased with me.” We might sign up for the choir, helping with the Egan Warming Center, or make a pledge for the comfort campaign, because if I do, God might like me more, and I'll feel like I've done something to say 'thank you.'
 - ii. If something goes wrong we presume God is mad at us, that we're one sin away from making God blow up in anger, that we have to pray the right words (always ending “in Jesus' name”) and enough times in order to be heard. We can't let ourselves be mad at God, disappointed with God, or frustrated at what God isn't telling us.

- iii. When we struggle with doubts or feeling the distance of God, how often we busy ourselves with good works to compensate for the void within?
- iv. The next thing we know, our prayers become less real, more formulaic, they might get longer but not necessarily better. We look forward to heaven but not necessarily meeting God... “What will God think? Will God like me? I hope he notices how hard I worked.”
- v. Though we don't have a culture of “wearing Sunday Best” here in Oregon, do we not still tend to put our best face on as we come through the door? We say “I'm fine, everything is OK, work is good, the kids are above-average as usual, you like my new shirt?” and hide the fact that we're lonely, afraid, slightly bored yet thoroughly exhausted. **How often do we gather merely to be religious rather than to be the church?** When our gathering for fellowship and worship becomes about appearances, what god are we serving?
- vi. That, my friends, is not grace. Is that the God who said..?
 - a) “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer ?) and
 - b) “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Mt 11:28) and
 - c) “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rm 8:1).
 - d) Through Christ we are offered God's favor we didn't earn, don't deserve, and frankly aren't sure what to do with. God's grace. When you pray are you resting in his grace? Sure, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” as Proverbs says, revering him and fully aware how much he hates evil, but this is the same God who said through the apostle John,
 - “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:18–19)

II. The Publican

- A. Background: Jews didn't like tax collectors (who does?).
 - i. Well, it was a great job. You could make a lot of money and positions were competitive. Yet the job was filled with much corruption, it attracted amoral social climbers, swindlers, and Jews who didn't mind betraying their people if it benefited them.
 - ii. They were considered outcasts, moral untouchables, “universally despised for their rapacity and low morals, scorned on political grounds and because their work involved contact with Gentiles. By Jewish law, a tax-gatherer was debarred from the synagogue; he was included with things and beasts unclean, ... he was forbidden to be a witness in any case; ‘robbers, murderers and tax-gatherers’ were classed together” (418, Barkley, from Bruner's commentary on Matthew)
 - iii. Thus, **it's quite amazing that the publican wants to pray at all!**
- B. Note the differences in our text:
 - i. Stood afar off, in court of Gentiles (vs stood in a more visible spot – court of the Jews)

- ii. Didn't look to heaven and beat his breast (vs prayed nobly)
 - iii. The only prayer he could pray was asking for mercy (vs thanking for already-had righteousness, didn't need to ask for anything)
 - iv. He sees himself only as “a sinner” (vs listing off his virtues)
- C. There is humility, penitence, and spiritual hunger in him.
- i. One gets the sense a deep lament is going on in his soul, Maybe like David's in Ps 51:
 - a) “Have mercy on me, O God... let the bones you have crushed rejoice. (v8) Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity (v9). Restore to me the joy of your salvation... (v12) My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (v17)”
- D. Jesus praises this approach to God, to prayer, to life.
- i. This is why, in part, the global church for millennia have included in their worship the *Kyrie Eleison*, “Lord have mercy.”
 - ii. Martin Luther echoes this approach in the first of his 95-Thesis: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ ... willed that **the whole life of believers should be repentance.**” What would life be like if our whole life was shaped by repentance? A whole life of turning away from sin, evil and death, a whole life of turning back towards God, even if it feels like walking up a down escalator.
 - a) We know false repentance: we're sorry for sin because got caught, because others saw us, or we fear punishment. True repentance is sorry for sin because it grieved God, our heart's true love, and shows us how far we go from his love.
 - b) We know false repentance when we self-flagellate hoping it will convince God and ourselves that we've done enough to merit forgiveness. True repentance is when we grieve over our sin, but because of the embrace of God's grace, we're free to be as open and honest as possible.
 - iii. Our passage in Jeremiah describes a true repentance:
 - a) “For we have often rebelled; we have sinned against you.” (Jer 14:7)
 - b) “We acknowledge our wickedness, LORD, and the guilt of our ancestors; we have indeed sinned against you. Remember your covenant with us and do not break it.” (Jer 14:20–21)
 - c) When we confess our sins, we do so in light of God's covenant love, made to our spiritual ancestors, Abraham, Moses, and especially through Christ.
 - iv. I saw a quote recently by Max Lucado, “Trust [God's] ability to receive your confession more than your ability to make it. ... **The power of confession lies not with the person who makes it but the God who hears it.**” (qt on FB)
 - a) **Christ has taken our guilt and shame at the cross and resurrection!**
 - v. We are gathered here today in this room not because we have it together or because this earns us God's favor, but because **we are united in our neediness of his grace.** The call of discipleship is a call to lay down our lives and take up the cross, following Jesus. **“You don't leave your old life behind just once. You leave it behind every morning, every day.”** (Michael Spencer, *Mere*

Churchianity, 6) I think this might be why Jesus used a story of prayer, a story of a daily habit. Maybe this tax collector wasn't just having an existential moment that was a turning point in his life. Maybe this was his daily habit!

CONCLUSION

Brennan Manning, in his book, *Abba's Child*, speaks of “the impostor” within himself. “The Imposter” is one preoccupied with impressing others. He is safe to hide with when life gets hard, peer pressure mounts, and shame was about to pounce on our failures. So he the impostor out there for others to deal with instead of his true self and prides himself in accomplishment – “I am what I do” – and acquisition – “I am what I own”.

Manning describes how he came to terms with this “impostor,” while on a retreat. That night he sat down and wrote a letter to “the impostor.” As he brings “the impostor” into the presence of Jesus he notices it begins to slow down.

In His presence I notice that you have already begun to shrink. Wanna know somethin', little guy? Your much more attractive that way. I am nicknaming you “Pee-Wee”... The longer you spend time in the presence of Jesus, the more accustomed you grow to His face, the less adulation you will need because you will have discovered for yourself that He is Enough. And in his Presence, you will delight in the discovery of what it means to live by grace and not by performance.” (*Abba's Child*, 44,45).

I wonder what Manning would've called this story... maybe something like “Pee Wee and the Ragamuffin.” You see, the Pharisee isn't a bastion of righteousness or religious prowess, but a shriveled up soul, a “Pee Wee” of sorts, wearied by all his good works and in dire need to experience the grace and love of God.

His story echoes ours when we're a patient in the hospital acting like we're just visiting someone else. As Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Mt. 9:12).

May our daily stance before God echo the prayers of the saints, “*Kyrie Eleison*, Lord have Mercy.” Not with a morose foreboding, but with joy, throwing ourselves into the arms of the prodigal's father, “The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...” (Ex 34:6)