

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-17
Psalm 84:1-6
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

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St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Actually, It's About God

In early June, I spent eight days in silent retreat at the New Camaldoli Hermitage, high up in the mountains of Big Sur. It is a place of exquisite beauty, surrounded by magnificent forests and with views of the Pacific Ocean as far as you can see. The hermitage is a place where very religious people, people who have no religion at all, and everyone in-between is welcomed by monks who live contemplative lives of prayer. It is a place of deep silence, the sort of silence that calls one to turn from the outer world to the interior world, the sort of silence that really makes it possible to hear the still, small voice of God. Other than in worship, spiritual direction or the bookshop, there is only silence at the hermitage, and in a very short time, I fell into the natural rhythms of prayer, study, simple meals, exercise and rest that direct the lives of the monks who live there. I spent a lot of quiet time thinking and writing about my rule of life – the way I try to pattern my non-monastery days around prayer, study, rest, refreshment, work and reflection. A Rule of Life offers a pattern grounded in listening for God's voice, studying scripture and looking carefully inside, in order to come closer to God and to live a holy life, a life oriented toward God.

While we wouldn't necessarily know it from the stories we hear, the Pharisees of Jesus' time were a bit like the monks at the hermitage. That may sound unlikely to you, because most encounters we read of with the Pharisees, find Jesus pointing out their scrupulosity and their failure to live into God's radical inclusion and extravagant love. But in order to gain more than a superficial understanding of the parable Jesus tells us today, we need to really understand who the Pharisees - and the tax collectors - of the first century were.

As I often say, the Pharisees were the good guys. They were set-apart, and different from most people just as monks and nuns are. They had a deep commitment to adhere to Jewish law, and that made them righteous. They were highly esteemed by most people because of their rigorously religious behavior. Pharisees were the best of the best rule followers, strict adherents to Jewish law and the holiest of the holy people.

While we can't really imagine what it would have been to belong to this strident Jewish sect, we can imagine nuns or monks or maybe even the person who's in church every Sunday, who faithfully tithes exactly 10% every year, who reads and studies scripture, who always volunteers and ensures that what needs to be done is properly done, the one who drives an electric car, recycles and composts everything, the one who works for causes and campaigns that are trying to bring about a more kingdom-like world.

As it turns out, everything the Pharisee said when he stood in the temple praying that day, was true. He knew right from wrong, knew good from evil, knew his place in God's eyes because he knew the law to the letter and followed it to the letter too. No wonder he was grateful! His was the highest of callings in his mind and he was grateful to God because he'd been blessed with a call to a holy life that was measured by his adherence to the law. He was golden and he knew it, because he had disciplined himself to be perfect. Think of the holiest person you know... that's who the first century hearers of this parable would have been thinking of when they thought of the Pharisees.

And the tax collector? Tax collectors were the worst of the worst. They lied, stole, cheated, and hurt their own people. They were the ones who had gone over to the dark side, stealing more than money. In extorting from their neighbors, they stole their very lives. They were the worst sort of traitors. They colluded with the Roman government against their own people, supporting the government that oppressed them all and putting lavish personal gain above the most basic welfare of people they knew and belonged to.

Who is the most loathsome character you can imagine? Is it the white-collar criminal who has cheated thousands of elders out of their retirement savings? Is it the drug dealer who supplies life-destroying drugs to precious children? Perhaps a world leader who cares nothing for the people in his care. Whoever that loathsome creature is for you, that's who the first century hearers of this parable would have been thinking of when they thought of the tax collector.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector..."

Understanding the context of first century society changes everything. It seems that the Pharisee, this man who had given his whole life to his faith, missed the boat. While he was grateful, which is a beautiful response to a generous, loving God, his gratitude didn't sound like it had much to do with God. His gratitude was for himself and his righteousness, his ability to live according to the law. He was thanking God that he was a good guy, not a bad guy. The trouble is, the Pharisee thought it was his goodness, his faithfulness, his Godly life that made him righteous in God's eyes. But it wasn't.

And the tax collector? The tax collector, corrupt as he was, knew he had no right even to stand before God. He stood apart from everyone, way at the back of the temple. He didn't even want to be seen and was only barely able to pray. And while he might very well have walked out of that temple and gone right back to his thievery, Jesus tells us that in the temple, he did nothing but beg for mercy. He begged God for mercy because he knew who he was, knew who God was, and knew his salvation depended on God's grace rather than his behavior.

This tricky parable lets us love the fact that the tax collector was humble, that he begged for mercy... but we still want him to change his ways, don't we? We want him to come back to the temple next week to tell God he's mended his ways. But that's probably not what happened. And that's just the point. It's not about him and his bad behavior any more than it's about the Pharisee and his good behavior. It's about God. It seems the tax collector had a moment of

absolute understanding. Standing in God's presence, he had no pretensions about his life, and he made no attempt to justify himself. He simply surrendered. *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."* And he went home justified – justified by God's grace, pure and simple. That grace was available to the Pharisee too, but the Pharisee couldn't help but be busy justifying his own self. He didn't think he needed God's justification, didn't need God to make him right, and so he didn't think to ask for, or even recognize God's grace and mercy.

This parable is tricky. It is so hard to give up believing that being good isn't the point. Being generous and thoughtful and devout and committed and loving and gracious and hospitable and kind – those are all beautiful things and surely people who are that way rather than mean, vindictive, self-absorbed, thoughtless, selfish, arrogant and certain... surely they are better people, right? Whether that's right or wrong, it isn't a good question for we mere mortals. It isn't ours to decide or really even take up. Because as it turns out, being justified isn't at all about how we behave. This parable is tricky. We think if we behave like the tax collector in the temple and the Pharisee in the world, God will justify us too. But it isn't about behaving. It's about recognizing God's love and grace and mercy and letting those things in no matter how well or badly we behave.

Does this mean that our behavior - what we do and what we leave undone - doesn't matter? Of course it matters. As followers of Jesus, our most natural response is to be generous, to want to share God's love, share in God's work – to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the sick, care for creation, to be generous and kind, to love the world back into wholeness. But our giving must be our grateful response to God's unspeakable and boundless love for us, not because the giving gets us closer to heaven, or even because it's the right thing to do. The truth is, the degree to which we give is the degree to which we've accepted God's love for us. The more we've accepted God's love of us, the more grateful and generous we are.

This is a parable about so much more than our humility or self-righteousness. This is a parable about God – it's a parable about how God acts in the world, about how God alone can know our human hearts, about how God welcomes and loves the most ungodly among us and loves us when we are our most ungodly selves. This is a parable about the reality that we are so deeply loved that God would never, ever risk letting our behavior be the basis for our salvation. GOD holds our salvation... and that way, we can be sure of it.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector..."

It may be that there's a bit of the Pharisee and a bit of the tax collector in each of us. And that's just fine. We are, all of us, making our way in the world and mostly we're doing our best. And it seems to me that Jesus knows this... which is why he's trying to tell us that we really could let loose of our need to get it all right. That we really could pray the prayer of the tax collector. That we really could stand before God without excuse or reason or expectation. That we could just show up in a posture so humble that we could actually take in the goodness and grace and

mercy that's meant just for us. And if we can just do that, we can all go home justified today.
Amen