

Heart Matters

What a wonderful parable Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It's meaning is so clear. It doesn't take a bible scholar to understand it.

Two people went to the Temple. They each prayed.

The first, The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself:

‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’

The second, the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather-- in pained repentance-- he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’

The meaning is so clear. We don't want to be like the Pharisee. We want to be like the Tax Collector. Why do we even bother bringing this up? Certainly your pastor can't have 18 minutes of material on this one. Think again...

The scripture tells us why Jesus bothered to bring it up. It says that “Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust.”

Jesus told this parable for the sake of people who were guilty of the Biblical sin of Pride, and who lacked the Biblical virtue of humility.

So, most of us understand that this parable is not for us. This is really for those people that haven't come to church much. "Thank you, God, that I know better. Thank you, God that I'm not like those people outside the church."

The problem is that it's so easy to become self-satisfied by what we do on Sunday morning or other days of the week. And just to make sure we're being humble, we wrap it up in some thanksgiving to God. Thank you God that I don't sleep in on Sunday morning, like all those other people who don't come to church.. I give a tenth, or at least give generously. So thank you God that I'm not like those people who can't manage their money. Thank you God that I'm not like those people who come to the Wednesday meal, but don't help out.

But it extends past church into the rest of life. Pride seeps into everything. Thank you God that I'm not like those ignorant bleeding heart Hillary supporters-- or thank you God that I'm not like those ignorant Trump supporters. Thank you God that I'm not like those crooks and evildoers that the police pick up. Thank you God that I'm not an adulterer.

I go to church. I help with the meals. I tithe. I stay clean. I stay sober. I save money. I go to bible study.

The prayer of Pharisee is all about what the Pharisee does. It's focused on the externals. He focuses on his behavior instead of the condition of his heart.

He doesn't just tithe a tenth of the things required by the law, but a tenth of everything! He doesn't just fast on the day of atonement, but twice a week!

The Pharisee *did* good things. The Pharisee did things that Jesus himself expects *his* followers to do. Matthew chapter 6-- we studied it a couple weeks ago on Tuesday night Bible study: Jesus expects his disciples to pray; Jesus expects his disciples to fast; Jesus expects his disciples to be generous in their giving. But what is critical is that these things be done for God and not to be seen.

The Pharisee does what is right. But the Pharisee is putting on a show. The Pharisee wants to be seen as being religious-- knowing the right things, saying the right things, doing the right things. As he prays, he prays standing by himself in order to be seen by others. He isn't seeking mercy from God-- he's telling God why he doesn't need mercy. On the outside, the Pharisee is religious. But on the inside, the Pharisee despises his neighbors, and he trusts in himself rather than God. Jesus teaches us that external appearances are deceiving.

It's so easy to focus on externals. And it's so tempting to lift up our actions before other people so that they won't know the true condition of our hearts-- so we ourselves won't even have to think of the true condition of our hearts.

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus talks about the importance of intentions. He says, 'you've heard it said, "Don't murder." ...But I say to you anyone *who is angry* with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment.' Internals matter.

He says later in that same chapter, “You have heard that it was said, Don’t commit adultery.... But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.” Actions matter. But there is more to being a follower of Jesus. What’s in mind matters. What’s in the heart matters. Jesus says, “First clean the inside of the cup so that the outside of the cup will be clean too.”

People who trust in their own righteousness tend to have trouble looking at the reality of what’s going on in their own hearts and minds. And it’s obvious why: doing so would expose the ugliness that’s going on on the inside. It would dirty perfect image that they have of themselves, which they want to project to the world. So instead they focus on the externals of the people around them so that they can see how they measure up.

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I’ve got to get my Methodist on right now. Do you know what it meant to be a Methodist, originally? In addition to faithfully attending your local church, you agreed to abide by the General Rules-- guidelines that are still in our Book of Discipline. Broadly, they are to do no harm, to do good, and practice all of the means of grace that God has provided for us-- worship, scripture study, fasting, private prayer. I talked about this back on August 7, if you’re interested in more details.

These particular externals were so important to what it meant to be a Methodist that it was required that every member participate in something called a “class meeting.” These were groups of about 12 people would gather and check in with each other. “How does your soul prosper?” they used to ask. Or in other words, how is your life with God? How are you doing on abiding by the general rules? This meeting

was the practical foundation of Methodism. Every convert-- and every person desiring conversion-- was placed in a class meeting. Talking about these externals helped people to keep watch on their internals.

For others that knew that they needed to go deeper, there are the optional “Band Meeting.” Class meeting was required, but “Band Meeting” was optional. This was a smaller group of 3 to 6. Instead of asking the question, “how is your life with God?” they would ask deeper questions: “What temptations have you faced since we last met?” “What sins have you committed?”

The goal is to help one another keep an eye on the internals. Externals matter, but appearances can be deceiving. God looks at the heart. The class meeting and the band meeting are both ways to help one another clean the inside of the cup so that the outside will be clean as well.

You want to cultivate some humility in your heart? Well, you don’t do it by talking about how humble you are. You do it by being honest about your failings before God.

The Pharisee looks at other people to see how he measures up. And in doing that, he fails to be at all honest about his own failings.

The Pharisee compares himself to the tax collector, and he sees that he is more upright. But here’s the problem with comparing ourselves with others: we don’t know their story. We don’t know their challenges. We don’t know their heart. Comparing myself to another person is not comparing apples to apples.

Comparing ourselves to others is pointless. It's just an attempt to excuse ourselves from any need to grow. We inflate the faults of others while diminishing our own. Maybe your externals are indeed better than some other people you can pick out. But how have you grown spiritually in the last 5 years? Or 10? Or 20? Perhaps they've grown immeasurably from where they started out, but you have stayed put.

It's so easy to look at the externals and to trust in our own behavior. It's so hard to be honest about the reality of what's going on on the inside. But only when we do that, when we're open before God about the reality of our hearts, do we allow the Holy Spirit, together perhaps, with some trusted spiritual friends, clean out the dirt.

For the tax collector isn't worried about matching up to the Pharisee. For him, the pressing matter is that matters is that he doesn't match up to God in the slightest. He probably really was a great sinner-- Tax collectors were notorious for extorting people in order to make sure that they were able to pay the Empire what they were due, while making sure to leave themselves with something left over. But the tax collector is lifted up as a model for us because he recognizes that before an holy God, he's in need mercy.

The goal isn't to force ourselves to hit rock bottom so that we realize how desperate we are. Though sometimes, for some of us, that needs to happen. Some of us have to mess up in a big way before we realize how powerless we truly are apart from God.

That may be necessary, but it's not the goal. The goal is honesty before God. And true honest before God ends in hoping and trusting in God's mercy-- continually.

What would it look like for you today if you were to drop all the pretense? What would it look like to take off the mask?

I have a mask-- I know I do. I don't want to, but I do. And so I meet weekly in a band meeting. I don't do it because I'm so holy, but because I'm so predisposed to pretense. Without people watching over me, I just measure myself against other people. I need other people to shine the light of God's holiness into my life and expose the things that I would keep hidden otherwise. I mean this sincerely: I can't imagine being a Christian without it.

What would it look like for all of us to drop the pretense? Don't worry about someone else's pretense. What about yours?

Because here's the thing about this type of pride in yourself: pride and prayer are like oil and water-- they just don't mix.

Yes, it's amazing that God is merciful to tax collectors. Yes, it's amazing that God is merciful to adulterers. God is merciful to the Hillary's and the Donald's of the world. God is merciful to drug dealers, prostitutes, pimps. God is merciful to people who don't like Charles Wesley hymns. I know, it's amazing. But the most amazing thing of all: God is merciful to me, a sinner.

And here's the thing about mercy: by definition, you have done nothing to earn it. You can only prevent yourself from receiving it by rejecting it.

Search your hearts, my brothers and sisters. What do you need to give to God this morning? What pretense do you need to drop in order to accept God's mercy?