

In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector at prayer, **the Pharisee is often depicted in a negative light** – he's the bad guy in the story. How vain and arrogant he is! But he wouldn't be seen as the bad guy to those listening to Jesus. The tax collector would be the villain in the story to them. When Jesus mentions his presence in the parable his hearers would have instinctively thought, "Traitor – lowest of the low!" If there were any doubt about the quality of their lives, **both men stated their moral status quite clearly, as we can hear in their prayers.**

Pharisee: 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity, I fast twice a week, (Tuesdays and Thursdays, by the way, market days, where they could be seen by the rest of humanity) and pay a tithe on everything! (Going above and beyond).

Tax Collector: I am a sinner!

So, **we can presume that his description of his moral life is accurate:** he is, "not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous." He leads a better life than "this tax collector." So what's the problem? After all he is a good and observant person. People observing the Pharisee leave the Temple after prayer that day would have agreed with his self assessment. They would also agree that the tax collector was a sinner! – case closed!

Not so fast! Remember Jesus is telling a parable and parables never go in the "proper" direction—the one we anticipate and consider inevitable. The parable doesn't conform to conventional human wisdom.

So here's the problem! The Pharisee is looking in the wrong direction. He is praying with his focus on his own life. Notice for example, how many times he refers to himself—"I". It's all about him.

Some people think our prayer can change God's mind. Actually, true prayer will change us. But there was no chance that the Pharisee's prayer would have any transformative effect on him. He seems to think that his extra good life has earned his salvation; that **God owes him a reward for his religious good works.**

But can you recognize the heresy of works in his focus on his own achievements? Where is the gift of God in the man's life? The Pharisee is so focused on his good works that he **fails to see God's activity in his life. The source of a person's**

goodness doesn't begin in the person, it comes from God. God is the gift giver and our goodness reflects God's goodness in us.

Luke tells us that Jesus address this parable, "to those who were convinced of their own righteousness...." It's a cautionary tale about a tendency we religious people and religious institutions can have: We have it! And those people don't. You could argue in some ways that is true. But the scripture argues in most ways it is not.

The tax collector focuses not on who he is, but on what he is not! In fact, unlike the Pharisee, he quickly turns his gaze away from himself and towards God. He is in need of God's blessing and cannot achieve it on his own. He is totally reliant on God and surrenders himself into God's hands. When he left the Temple that day he would look the same to those observing him. But Jesus marks the difference they would not be able to see in him – he "went home justified."

In biblical language that means he was delivered from his sin. How did that happen? What did the tax collector do to "merit" this forgiveness? Nothing. He was a sinner who turned completely to God for forgiveness and God's mercy responded.

So hopefully, the tax collector's prayer today is our prayer as well, "**O God, be merciful to me a sinner.**" We have placed our trust in our God who has created us and provided us with ample reason to give praise for all the beauty and goodness within and around us. We also know we can trust the same God to forgive us when we have turned away and made ourselves the primary focus of our lives—like the Pharisee.

John Shea recalls the revelatory experience Thomas Merton, spiritual writer, Trappist monk, had standing on a street corner in Louisville, Kentucky. Merton was overwhelmed by his love for all the people around him and how he was not separated from them, but one with them. He shouted on the street corner, "Thank God, thank God that I am like other [people], that I am only a man among others." Then, in further wonder, Merton exults in praise that, "God... is glorified in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race!" ("The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C: the Relentless Widow," Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006, page 299.)

So, while we "humble self" as Jesus recommends, we remember with praise that we are not only united with each other in our humanity, but also with God who, in the great act of humility, became one of us in Jesus Christ.

Phillippians 2:

Jesus though in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped at,

Rather he emptied himself taking the form of a slave and coming in human likeness.

He humbled himself becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross and because of this God greatly exalted him.

And bestowed on him a name that is above every name...

So that every tongue might confess,

JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!

Good enough for the Lord?

It was good enough for the tax collector a sinner!

Better be good enough for us!

Remember Look to where you are going

Amen