

### 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C (2025)

Every once in a while (or sometimes, quite often), we hear about one of our favorite people behaving badly.

Maybe it's a co-worker who we find out has been seriously abusing her corporate expense account. Maybe it's a friend who suddenly spends all sorts of time alone with someone who is not his wife. Perhaps it's a classmate who decides to stop returning your calls and texts for no plausible reason.

And when that happens, when someone we “like” has “fallen from grace,” it can make us feel, make us wonder, and begin to think to ourselves, “I thought he (or she) was one of the good guys.”

Of course, implicit in this sort of statement is the assumption that people can be divided into two clearly distinct categories: “good” people and “bad” people. Moral or immoral. Loving or cruel. Generous or stingy. Honest or dishonest.

And since there are only two options to choose from, most of us have absolutely no trouble doing what you'd expect: putting ourselves in the “good” category.

And so, we often work very hard to keep ourselves in the “good” category by doing what I like to call “moral gymnastics”—somehow making our dishonest practices, not as bad as those of others, or consider our lies simply a “stretching of the truth” or defending our lack of generosity as “responsibly planning for the future.”

And so, we almost never consider ourselves to be the problem. We clearly aren't what's wrong with this world. We aren't the ones who really need to change. We're one of the "good guys." "And thank God, I am not like the rest of humanity."

And that puts us in a very select group—one which gets a lot of "special" attention from Jesus throughout Scripture. Unfortunately, it's just about the only group with which Jesus has a serious problem.

Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, foreigners—Jesus readily accepts them, and is kind to them, compassionately reaches out to them, and draws close to them (despite society's stern disapproval).

But what of those people who are convinced of their own goodness? Convinced of their own righteousness? Convinced of their obvious moral superiority?

Well, it seems that Jesus has a grave problem with those who think that way. They're just about the only people in Scripture to whom Jesus really gives a piece of his mind. People who harbor thoughts that disappoint or anger him.

The Pharisee in today's Gospel had it completely wrong. The one who had it right was the tax collector standing off to the side, afraid even to raise his eyes to heaven.

*Comparison is the thief of joy.* That old line contains a lot of wisdom. The one who finds his worth only by comparison to others will be haughty when he's better than they and discouraged when he's not. Those are simply two sides of the same coin of pride.

Another variation is to think of ourselves as failures for not meeting our self-imposed standards, rather than receiving the love God extends and finding our worth in His estimation. The proud set the terms for being loved instead of receiving what God extends. They grasp for what He wants to give.

Pride is slavery. Humility is freedom. “[T]he tax collector stood off at a distance but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’” To our culture, this must seem tremendously unhealthy. He would be accused of low self-esteem.

In fact, his humility opens the door to a genuine conversation with God. Unlike the Pharisee, he’s praying to God, not to himself. Prayer is the first fruit of humility, a speaking to God not as a self-made man but as one dependent on God and joyful about it.

There is a thin line between the confidence of the tax collector and the arrogance of the Pharisee.

As C.S. Lewis said, “true humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.”