

Written: Luke 18:10-14 “Are You the Pharisee or the Tax Collector?”

20th Sunday @ Pentecost, Proper 25

Sunday, October 23rd, 2022

Text: Luke 18:10-14

¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

The text's intent

Jesus shows us how a heart that is unrepentant and full of itself has no desire for the salvation He has come to provide. All the works that we might cite as garnering favor are worthless to put us in right standing with God. It is only the broken and humbled heart that can see itself the way the Lord sees and judges us, lacking anything of worth but totally corrupt with sinfulness. This heart clings by faith to the promises of Christ that His life, death, and resurrection are the atoning sacrifice that takes away all sinful charges against us and declares us by faith to be in right standing with Him. We come as a child with no merit of our own, but looking only to the mercy and grace that God freely gives through the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Focus Statement:

Jesus is at work in our hearts through this parable to show us how we are like the Pharisee so He can break our proud hearts and bring to bear faith that relies on His work of atonement, and not on anything we have done, could do, or who we are outside of faith in Him. We come like the child, unworthy to demand anything, yet greatly loved, welcomed, washed clean, and made His own by grace alone.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We know that the tax collector is the hero of the parable, and the Pharisee is villain. But how often do we fail to see the ways we are like the Pharisee, judging we are better or not as bad as others. Seeing our works as counting as something before the Lord? How often do we fail to see ourselves as God sees us, like that miserable tax collector?

What the hearer should do as a result:

Judge our worth not by what we do, or in comparison with those around us, but who we are declared to be through faith in all that Christ has done for us.

Subject Sentence: Only Faith Can Make the Pharisee the Tax Collector

Introduction: Who's the Good Guy and Who's the Bad Guy?

Whenever you read a book or watch a movie isn't one of the most important things on your mind this question: "Who is the hero? And who is the villain?" In many stories it's obvious, we know who the good and bad guys will be before we even start watching like those superhero movies, James Bond movies, or action hero movies. But when we are not sure, that can be unsettling. That plot twist can often hold our attention as we try to figure out who is who. We need to know who to align ourselves with. Which character is the hero? Which character is the good guy?

One example for me is the classic movie Casablanca. Humphry Bogart plays the part of the exiled American Rick Blaine, stuck living in French controlled Casablanca during World War II. He is the owner of Rick's American Café. As the movie opens, we see him as a bitter man with the mantra "I don't stick my neck out for nobody. In a flashback scene we find out why that is. Rick was left heartbroken at the train station by a woman, Elsa Lund, played by Ingrid Bergman, who he fell in love with while living in Paris. They had planned to escape the coming German invasion of the city together. They agree to meet on the train platform, only she never shows up. Instead, he receives a letter from her that he reads in the rain, where drops of rain run down the page like tears from heaven. The letter says she can't go with him, or ever see him again, and he mustn't ask why.

But then, sometime later, Elsa, wanders into his nightclub in Casablanca along with her husband. Rick finds out she was married even when he met her in Paris. Her husband is a part of the underground war resistance, a hero of sorts, whom she believed at that time to have been captured and killed. But right before she was supposed to leave with Rick, she finds out he's still alive, and she decides to stay in Paris to care for him and nurse him back to health. And now they are looking to escape from Casablanca to America to avoid capture by the Germans. Rick has the means to help both of them escape, two letters of transit. Giving it to them would be the hero thing to do. But he's still in love with her, and is seriously considering taking her to America himself and leaving her husband stranded, or turning him over to the Germans. That would be Rick as the villain, the bad guy. As the movie is playing out, we wonder which one Rick would be, the hero or the villain.

The Good Guy and the Bad Guy in Jesus' Parable

As we consider Jesus' parable today, who is the good guy and who is the bad guy? On the surface it seems pretty clear, the bad guy is the Pharisee. We know all about those Pharisees from Jesus previous encounters with them. Jesus has been contending with them back in Galilee, and continues to contend with them now as he is on the road to Jerusalem, and will have confrontations with them in the Temple leading up to His arrest and crucifixion. They don't believe He is who He claims to be, The Messiah, because they don't see Him keeping the laws the way they do.

Luke 18:11-12 ¹¹ **The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.**

The Pharisee in this parable is the epitome of how they saw themselves before God. The Pharisee stands in a prominent place where all could see him. He prays to himself, praying out loud as Jewish men did, and so all those around him might hear him. He brags and boasts to God about all the pleasing things he has done, about how pious and committed he is to keeping the law perfectly, how he goes over and above what was required. The laws given by Moses only required God's people to fast one day a year, the Day of Atonement. But this Pharisee fasts twice a week. A good Jew was only required to tithe on his income. But this Pharisee goes over and above by tithing not just the income, but the value of whatever he buys with that income.

Then there is his comparison with other men, those who are not Pharisees and do not keep the extra laws, those over and above what God had commanded, the 600 and some laws of the Elders instituted as a protective hedge to make sure they didn't come close to transgressing God's laws. He remarks how he is not unjust like them, he's not a blatant lawbreaker like them. He's not like those who are so in love with material wealth that they seize what doesn't belong to them by any means necessary, be it legal or illegal. He's not an adulterer. And last but certainly not least, he's not one of those sinfully corrupt tax collectors. He's not one of those Jews who have betrayed their countrymen to work for the Roman government collecting taxes, men who makes their living by collecting the amount prescribed Rome, plus an additional amount over and above what Rome required. With this over and above amount they lined their own pocket. The more you could line your pocket with the better off your life would be. The Pharisees thanks God he is not one of those, who are the worst of the worst. He judges all of these other people as being unworthy of God's kingdom, and therefore unworthy of his concern. Like Cain in our Old Testament Reading, he is not his brother's keeper by any extent.

We know from previous Gospel Lessons that the Pharisees are the bad guys. But how would many of those listening to this parable in Jesus' day would think so? Many would see the Pharisee as the good guy. Many of the people held them up as the role model for what it means to live a life that is right with God. After all he keeps all the laws to perfection, doesn't that please God? So, for many listening to this parable, especially the Pharisees gathered around, this verse comes as a shocker: **Luke 18:14a I tell you, this man** (the tax collector) **went down to his house justified, rather than the other.** It's not the law-abiding Pharisee that is declared to be right with God, but the tax collector who has been a traitor and a swindler of his own people.

The people listening would be surprised, but we aren't. We have heard Jesus say in **Luke 5:30-32** ³⁰ **And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"** ³¹ **And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."** Jesus came to have fellowship with, to eat, to teach, to share His kingdom message in order to bring His reign and rule into the hearts of those whom the Pharisee considered not worthy of God's love, God's grace, God's mercy, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sinners-those who don't live like the Pharisees. And the problem with this Pharisee is he doesn't see himself in need of Jesus, the Great Physician.

The only difference between these two men is their heart condition. This Pharisee is in reality as big a sinner as the tax collector. He may keep the laws with the works of his hands, but not out of love for God in his heart. The Pharisee's prayer is all about him: "I do this, and I do that, and I'm better than them." He spends his whole-time telling God how lucky God is to have a man like him in His kingdom. Nowhere in that prayer does the Pharisee ask for anything, because he doesn't see that he needs anything. He is self-sufficient, self-righteous. But the problem is no amount of good works or deeds can make us right before the Father. This Pharisee is actually worse than the tax collector, because he is outside of the reign and rule of God. He is lost.

Contrast his prayer with the heartfelt prayer of the tax collector. **Luke 18:13** **But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'** The tax collector doesn't site anything worthy about himself. He doesn't stand in a prominent position and make a show out of his praying. Most Jewish men would pray with their eyes lifted up toward heaven, but this tax collector's eyes are cast down, he is not worthy to pray to the Lord. He beats his breast as the outward sign of his inward remorse over the sinful lifestyle he has lived. He stands before God totally unworthy of anything. His heart has been broken by the law. Unlike the Pharisee he sees the enormity of his sin from the eyes of the Holy and just God. He offers nothing to the Lord, because he knows he has nothing to offer. Instead, He cries out for mercy.

And what kind of mercy is he looking for? The mercy and grace that flowed from the sacrificial altar in that very temple, the grace and mercy that flowed from the blood of the animals that took his place on that sacrificial altar. Forgiveness that flows from the blood of those sacrifices that looked forward to the greater sacrifice that had been promised. And in fact, that greater sacrifice was now here telling this parable. That tax collector's sin condemned him to hell. But Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world had come to take upon himself every thought, word, and action that condemned the tax collector. He took them and suffer the punishment of death on the cross. And He rose again so that he might know there is no other sacrifice needed. And he has come to do the

same thing for you. You can align yourself with the tax collector because like him, all your sins have been forgiven too.

Luke 18:14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

How is that out of two men, both who are equally sinful, equally deserving of punishment, one can leave the temple in right standing with God, forgiven of his sins, while the other remains condemned to hell? How is it that you and I can leave this sanctuary, being just as unworthy as either man, yet know that all sinful charges have been dropped? It had nothing to do with them, who they were or what they'd done. It has nothing to do with you: who you are or what you've done. It has everything to do with the Holy Spirit working through God's Word. Through the Law the Spirit shows you how far you have fallen, how widely you have missed the mark according to the perfection God requires of His children. Then once you see the enormity of your sinfulness, when your heart has been humbled by the law, the Holy Spirit brings the Gospel to bear on you. He shows you the free gift of grace that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. He instills that power of faith by which you hold fast to His promise that God remembers your sin no more, Because of that faith in Christ, God declares you to be what you could never be on your own: in right standing with Him, declared innocent of all charges, good enough to live life with Him now and into eternity.

Who Are You? The Pharisee or the Tax Collector?

So, in this parable who do you see yourself as? Are you the Pharisee or the Tax Collector? Well, we know the tax collector is the good guy in the story, the forgiven guy, so we want to see ourselves as him. But what happens when we take an honest look at our lives lived out as Christians. How often do our thoughts and prayers resemble those of the Pharisee? How often do we judge others as being bigger sinners than us because of how they live, how they dress, who they vote for, the color of their skin? How often do we deflect the seriousness of our sin by saying "Well, I'm not as bad as that guy over there"? How often do we by our thoughts, words, and actions consider others as not worthy of the kingdom of God, or at least not worthy of our time to share His kingdom message with them? How often do we fail to see ourselves as our brother's keeper?

I want to be the tax collector, but there is a goodly amount of Pharisee within me. And if truth be told there's a goodly amount of Pharisee in you as well. We all need that same heart change that came upon the tax collector every bit as bad as the Pharisee does. We need it not just once in our baptism, not just once a week on a Sunday, but every day in private confession. We need to hear the Spirit's voice in the law showing us our Pharisee like ways. We need to be humbled and broken in our hearts, so that the same Spirit can exalt us through the Gospel. We need Him by faith to remind us of who we really are, poor miserable sinners who have declared to be in right standing with our Heavenly Father, not because of anything we do, but because of everything Jesus has done for us.

Conclusion

In the movie Casablanca, at the end, Rick turns out to be the hero that we want him to be. He has a change of heart. He gives the letters of transit to Elsa and her husband Victor Lazlo and gets them on the plane headed to America, letting the love of his life slip through his fingers. He protects them from being stopped by killing a German officer about to prevent takeoff, and in doing so puts a price on his head. He realizes that what is more important is the good Lazlo and Elsa can do for the underground movement if they are both free. And he realizes that, as much as he loves Elsa, she needs to be by her husband's side.

We too need a change of heart. We wake up every morning with the heart of the villain, the Pharisee, one who wants God to give us divine credit for the good things we've done, one that wants to see all the we have as coming from the hard work of our hands and meant for our good alone. And we want to receive a free pass for our lack love and compassion for those around us we consider to be unworthy of a place in Christ's kingdom, the Church. We need the Spirit working through the law to perform the same heart operation that the tax collector had. We need to him to show us how we are really the bad guy, and it's Christ alone by faith that makes us the good guy, good enough by faith to be in right standing before our Heavenly Father now and into eternal life to come. Amen.