

“TRUSTING OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS OR RELYING ON GOD’S GRACE?”

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It almost sounds like those jokes where a rabbi, a priest and a pastor go into a bar. With a few deft strokes, Jesus draws up a timeless tale. It’s one brief sketch. Two men enter the temple to pray. One is honorable and virtuous, the other disreputable and disgraced. The Pharisee is a pious, devoted, Bible-believing man. From his spiritual practices, we can tell he is a good and moral person. This is someone who acts on his faith, giving generously to meet the needs of others. The tax collector is a collaborator with occupying Rome, complicit with an Israel’s enemy overlord. He defrauds his neighbors, skimming funds for a cruel empire.

So in his telling, Jesus sets us up to identify with the Pharisee, not the taxman. After all, here we are praying and singing today, passing around offering plates, giving for others, just as the Pharisee did. What transpires? Surprise of surprises, one emerges justified--right with God and self--the other departs unsatisfied. The cheat gets right with God, but the upright guy leaves at odds with self and God. As Walter Lippman stated, the unregenerate man can only muddle into muddle.

What is the difference between them? For the Pharisee religion means lifting himself, buddying up to God, elevating himself higher and higher. That’s no option for the tax collector, living in the dregs, a cheater. He’s so inept at morality, so very low, he can only bend low before God’s throne. One seeks God, commending his own goodness. The other lets God come to him in his brokenness.

So the parable asks how God sees us as opposed to how we see ourselves. When God looks at us here in our Sunday finery, maybe he doesn’t see the good and upright lining up on one side, and the lost and sinful cringing upon the other. Maybe God sees all of us as weak, needy, wayward, struggling and lost children. Maybe God sees all of us needing him to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. If we see church as where good people pick ourselves up by our bootstraps to reach God, maybe God sees church as where he as lovingly climbs down to us in Emmanuel, God-with-us. God-with-us in our best moments, but also in our *sin*.

There, I’ve said it. The word I’ve carefully avoided so far: sin. The word we dislike hearing. The word we might imagine we’ve graduated from, like the Pharisee. “I don’t do awful things or commit wicked deeds.” Actually, neither did the Pharisee.

The parable says not so fast. Maybe we’ve missed something. Maybe sin isn’t a two-dimensional cardboard cutout melodrama of horned devils wearing red suits. Maybe our sin is more clever than cheating or stealing, defrauding or defaming. Maybe our sin creeps in as we feel, “God, I thank you that I’m not like those (you fill in the blank), liberals or conservatives, business people or environmentalists, military supporters or peaceniks, sitting next to me in the pews on Sunday morn.”

Maybe sin pervades more subtly than we imagine. Don't picture it as lurid vice. Think of how in everything, we manage to make it about *us*, about what *we* want. Martin Luther said, "The essence of sin is that in everything, I seek for myself, even in seeking God." That aptly describes the Pharisee, wrapped up in himself--his generosity, prayers, and devotion to temple. He's so busy congratulating his good and righteous self, he maligns the tax collector neighbor he's meant to love.

Jesus's parable gives us a window into the mind of a gracious and merciful God. What we see is that on any given Sunday, we can expect two kinds of sinners. First, those who assume they already know who God is and what God wants, God's insiders, certain they are the solution and not the problem. Next are those aware of the tremendous and terrifying chasm between themselves and God, the distance between who they are and who they should be, their unworthiness before his freely given favor, keenly aware of their failure to live life as God's gift. Some sin with self-righteous smugness and others sin with cheating or thieving.

It is interesting that the parable begins, "two men went up to the temple to pray." It intrigues me because the Pharisee doesn't really pray. He just talks to himself, impressed by his goodness, self-narrating his admittedly impressive practices.

But it's a monologue. Prayer is always conversation. If the Pharisee feels above prayer, the taxman enters prayer from underneath. He stands unworthy off to the side, beats his breast and utters a plea, ready to drown, seizing a life preserver. He prays like he is on the verge of annihilation, with good reason. God's forgiveness surprises him. One praises himself to burnish a proud self-image while the other clings to wreckage, having hit an iceberg. Jesus concludes, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The parable isn't about prayer so much as attitudes toward self and neighbor and especially our attitude toward God. Laid out before God, our virtues are not so shining and pure. More like a bunch of oily rags. Before God's righteousness, we are all *at best* only a bunch of scoundrels, scalawags and scavenging rascals. Clarence Jordan claims that both characters get what they ask for. The Pharisee asks for nothing and gets it. The tax collector asks for everything and he gets it.

The splendid writer Annie Dillard was attending a small Congregational church on Bainbridge Island, when she wrote. "The higher Christian churches where, if anywhere, I belong—come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I really believe, genuinely shocked." From there, she wonders why Deacons don't hand out crash helmets with the order of worship.

Dillard's words remind me of our sharing the Lord's Supper here two weeks ago. Gary Morello and a Deacon were one station, April Barker and I the other. We want you craving and seeking to be here on Communion Sundays rather than punting and skipping. So I tell Deacons, look the person in the eye, smile as you serve, say their name, and then the words, "The body of Christ, broken for you."

So far I've failed in emboldening them like this. I wonder about that because our Deacons are incredible partners in ministry. But serving with April, I learned why. She kept her eyes way down low and could barely whisper the words of blessing. I thought to myself, well, maybe she's shy. Then I realized, April Barker isn't shy.

April quietly spoke to Cecile and me afterward. "That was *hard* for me," she said. "Who am I to share the body of Christ with them?... All I could do was mumble, like, talk to him, he is the real guy, let Dale serve you." Cecile didn't miss a beat. "Guess what, April? He's a beloved child of God and so are you." I thought, way to go, Cecile. You're truly getting this pastor's wife thing down! But in truth Cecile could have also said, "Don't be fooled, April. He is as much a sinner as you are."

Cecile is not only the greatest thing that has happened to me, a gift of God to me. She has a heart of gold, and knows me better than anyone else on God's earth. But sometimes I am short with her, impatient, distracted, unfeeling, not so caring. So as I share the bread and cup, as I baptize our babies, I feel unworthy, also.

What's my point? If I get to pastor a church willing to be honest about our brokenness, I tell you, unimaginably great things are possible here. But if we push down that feeling, shamefully deny it as unworthy of "righteous people" like us, and pretend we are all perfect, well...the unregenerate church can only muddle into muddle. Our shared life together will be more missed opportunity than greatness.

When we enter God's holiness, crushed by our unworthiness, we need not hide, like Adam and Eve in the garden. When that feeling overwhelms us, "all this you have done for me, loving God, and I live like I don't give a rip," that moment is the turning point, the pivot. That's what repentance means—turning--not self-hate. Turning in the right direction to become the humans God intends us to become. Turning toward where God's already seeking us, not seeking to be our own gods.

It is pretty simple. If we live puffed up, sufficient alone unto ourselves, we allow God no room to enter us, heal us, and transform us. We make that impossible, because God is love. And love can't force itself or coerce. For it would cease to be love. When we become full of ourselves, we leave God no room to work in us.

But if we're honest in moments of deflating collapse, failures in our intentions to do better, convicted by our selfishness, then God's Spirit enters us, fills us, and renews us. Are you open to finding spiritual power in our weakness rather than in our strength? That is the Gospel of the cross. That is our good news. Hold on to it and never let it go. Hold on to each other like everything's at stake. It is. Amen.