

Proper 25C 2019 SSP

St. Luke 18:9-14

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus's parable today contrasting the prayer of the Pharisee with the prayer of the tax collector is one of his most important, in order for us to understand what Jesus means by a right relationship with God.

When Jesus says that the tax collector returned home from the temple "justified" rather than the Pharisee, he means he went home in a right relationship with God, and the Pharisee did not. And in order to appreciate the contrast, we need first to see what a Pharisee was and what a tax collector was as Jesus told his story.

The Pharisees were the strict, observant, orthodox Jews of Jesus's day. In fact, Jesus agreed with the Pharisees on several doctrinal matters; for example, on the existence and ministry of angels, or on the resurrection of the dead on the last day. Yet the Pharisees formed the hard core of the spiritual opposition to Jesus and his ministry. And it was the spirit of the Pharisees, or at least many of them, that Jesus found himself up against.

On the other hand, tax collectors were despised because they worked for the Roman Empire, the overlords of occupied Judea. And the Roman taxation system made the collectors even more disliked, because they were allowed, as long as they collected the taxes due to Caesar, to gouge a cut for themselves. For example, one tax collector in Jericho, Zacchaeus (who was to become a disciple of Jesus), was very rich.

So generally speaking, the Pharisees were the strict and observant Jews, while the tax collectors were regarded as religiously unclean.

Jesus was not favoring the occupation of the tax collector over the lives of his observant fellow-Jews. He was making use of an offensive contrast to make a profound spiritual point. We know that Jesus had disciples from both groups. Witness Zacchaeus already mentioned as well as Saint Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist, both tax collectors. Witness as well Nicodemus from the high council of the Jews in Jerusalem (the very one that condemned Jesus) and Saul of Tarsus who became Saint Paul the Apostle – both eminent Pharisees before following Jesus.

So what is Jesus's point? His point is that none of us, ever, has a ground for boasting, or the entitlement of credentials, in our relationship with God. When the Pharisee in today's Gospel story thanks God, he does it because he imagines he has grounds for boasting and credentials over against others. But if everything we have is a gift, how in the world can we imagine we have something to brag about, especially standing before the Giver of all gifts?

The tax collector in Jesus's story, on the other hand, is relieved by his social standing from the delusions cherished by the Pharisee. He has not fooled himself into thinking he has bragging rights or credentials, especially in relation to God. All he wants is mercy.

I believe Jesus is saying that mercy is all anyone should want from God. Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, spoke often of his relationship with the Father, in order to attract and invite followers into the grace of that relationship. As he told Nicodemus, in order to see and enter the kingdom of God, we must be reborn. A tax collector beating his breast and asking for mercy is much closer to that rebirth and entry than an outwardly religious person who is inwardly full of pride. The former is "justified" and near the kingdom while the latter is far away.

Jesus is not recommending that we take up disreputable vocations so that we may then cry for mercy. He is not saying that we should sin in order that we may be forgiven. He is describing what it takes to join him in his sinless filial relationship with God, that we might be

adopted children, sons and daughters of his Father. It is what Saint Paul, that former Pharisee, calls being and living “in Christ,” dying to the old life of sin and rising with Jesus in his victory over sin to the new life of grace.

If we are to take up any career, it is a lifelong career of self-forgetful humility leading to a joy that is free from the pressures of self-assertion, self-will, and self-esteem. It is the state of soul described by the Apostle in his famous passage about self-giving love. Namely, that it is patient and kind; not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude; not insistent on its own way, not irritable or resentful; not rejoicing at wrong but rejoicing in the right; bearing, believing, hoping and enduring all things. And in fact, never ending, because love will be needed on the other side of death since God is Love.

This is why Saint Paul says that faith, hope and love abide, but that the greatest of these three is love. Why? Because, when we get there, on the other side, faith will have been fulfilled by sight. We will see Jesus. And hope will have been fulfilled. We will be there with him. But love, which never ends, is still needed as the ingredient that will make us happy there with joy unspeakable. For the unloving soul, heaven would be an unpleasant surprise and, God forbid, we might be more at home in some other place, especially if we insist on our bragging rights and credentials rather than rejoicing in God’s mercy.

The greatest of the saints, as they have grown in grace, have at the same time become ever more acutely aware of how far short they have fallen of the perfection of Jesus. And in this awareness, they are all the more thankful for his love and mercy which has been with them all the way, from the first day until now.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.