

Sermon Notes: October 23, 2022

[Lectionary Readings](#)

Focus: The parable of the tax collector and Pharisee

As a preacher, I sometimes find myself arguing with Jesus. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector asking for God's mercy is one such story. Jesus is clear:

religious hypocrite/Pharisee = bad repentant rogue/ tax collector = good

This is at least according to how I understand this parable. The problem is that **Jesus was a Pharisee**. His criticisms of pharisaical behavior would be cruel and disconnected if his life were outside an unwavering commitment to and intimate knowledge of Pharisaical Jewish practice — whose foundation is holiness. Pharisaical Judaism was the most grassroots, locally focused expression of Judaism at the time.

Think about it another way. I am an Episcopalian. I know the vibe and practice of what it means to be an Episcopalian. I have some choice words to say about the failings of our church, Episcopalian leaders, and my own inability to live up to and lead from the highest values of my faith. But I don't get a pass on being dismissive of "those" people because they are me. On the other hand, this familiarity gives me limited ability to nudge and cajole fellow Episcopalians into a deeper practice of faith.

This is the spirit behind what Jesus is saying. He is pushing his followers to understand the grace of God more. Many followers are basically pharisees in their world view. (Yes, there also were tax collectors and sinners who wanted to hear him, but that is in a moment.) An ideal Pharisee is committed to personal holiness, communal charity, and a global vision of God being a loving God for all. Many of us fit this mold of Pharisee. The cartoon villain of Pharisee as sanctimonious power grabber certainly existed but was never the norm nor the goal. Jesus used this story of the "Pharisee and the Publican" to dig deeper into his listener's lives.

There are seven (types of) Pharisees in the Talmud(s)

Roughly based on the Babylonian Talmud (supplement), Abot^h de R. Nathan 37.4:

Almost like the seven deadly sins, there are seven common traps of faith as imagined by seven different Pharisees. They are superficial; critical; calculating; troubled; drug down (one for whom just living is hard); preoccupied (with their own talents); and fearful. I fit at least three of these, some if not most of the time.

Now the Publican: Tax collectors (tax collecting in the Roman period)

Tax collectors were usually Jewish people who sold out their neighbors for profit. Entrepreneurial types would get into tax collecting because they could stand to make more money than as fishermen. Despite our pious beliefs about ourselves, many of us would jump at the chance to be a tax collector if we lived in the New Testament period - and we would be grateful for the opportunity. Tax collectors were a mix of the IRS and the Mafia.

"Tax farming" in the Roman period created the Jewish tax collector. Rome did not want to bother with the tedious administration of collecting taxes, so they found motivated people to do the work for them. A hypothetical Roman official would assess a Jewish village as owing \$10,000. The official would let someone "buy" these taxes. Viola – this entrepreneur would assume the burden of collecting the money, and he

became a tax collector. If he paid back the \$10,000, he could squeeze the people for as much as he could get away with. Let's say Matthew the tax collector gets \$15,000. He can keep \$5000. You can imagine that this was a good business model for those who did not worry about the morals of exploitation.

The tax collector in the story today was imagined as especially troubled by the hard realities of selling out his neighbors. I seriously doubt he would have left this sanctuary with a new vow of poverty and in the style of St. Francis leave it all behind. The repentant rogue was justified mainly because he knew the limits of trying to be a better person. His small faith was no match for the big faith that God has in store for him and us.

Learn from both - don't pick a winner

Instead of falling into the either/or situation of the tax collector versus the Pharisee, what if we admitted the complexity of all humanity? What if we were less harsh on people trying hard to be a better person and more sympathetic to the compromised life of others (and ourselves)? Both **men fell short of God's will. We all fall short of the glory of God.** I like what Francisco Garcia says about common ground:

*We have common ground in being human and being human is just hard. We can assume that the tax collector's powerful demonstration of repentance and humility was prompted by some egregious feeling of wrongdoing—perhaps it was the fact that he was an agent of the Roman empire extracting wealth unjustly from his community. Regardless of how we judge the Pharisee's response, this context may have played a role in his negative feelings against the tax collector. Also, according to Jewish practice, the Pharisee was righteous, going above and beyond what the customs required in fasting and giving. **

*Mikeal Parsons, Luke, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament, edited by Mikeal Parsons et al., Baker Academic, 2015, 266-267.

[From working preacher, author Francisco Garcia](#)

Regardless of how we judge the Pharisee's response, it was at least understandable. His family was hurt badly by tax collectors, just like the guy in the story. The Pharisee is more interesting to me and offers a way to imagine spiritual growth.

Another writer I like also says

We might begin to believe that things we do (giving money to the church, doing religious or charitable activities, being upstanding members of society, making a well-deserved salary) or don't do (being thieves, rogues, or adulterers) really might justify us, at least a little, might make us a bit better than those who fail where we succeed. But until we let go of that notion, the parable suggests, we will not go home justified. We will be prisoners to our own small righteousness. [From working preacher, author Meda Stamper](#)

We are limited and our limits are a gift. They are a gift because we can reach out for and receive grace no matter how nice or naughty we are. **Todd**