

Whew, at least I am not like that!
Luke 18:9-14

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

So who do you want to be in this Gospel reading today? Jesus gives us a parable that compares clearly two different people. And as in any parable we have to ask ourselves which one we are in this story- the Pharisee or the Tax Collector.

In Jesus day if you asked someone, "Which would you rather be – a Pharisee or a Tax Collector?" - it was an easy decision. Pharisee would win every time. They were the good guys, the ministers of the synagogues and leaders of their towns. People went to them for advice, matters of faith, and all parts of your life, from circumcision, to blessings of cleansings, to weddings, to funerals. They were men of honor and well respected in their communities.

While on the other hand the tax collectors were viewed as the "bad guys". They were the traitors to their country, they bought their positions as Roman tax collectors to work against their neighbors, the friends, their people. They had to literally buy their way into this job because they knew that in this position they could extort even more money than it cost to get the position. Usually the tax collectors were cheats and shake down artists – skimming the excess tax money off the top of what was owed to Rome and pocketing the difference. By the force of the Roman guards these tax collectors could force their own neighbors to pay higher and higher taxes or face prison, slavery, torture or death. They were viewed as outcasts, to be kept at a distance, ritually unclean, people to be avoided by all true Israelites.

And so Jesus sets up his listeners to hear his parable by given them these two examples of men, a Pharisee or a Tax Collector. Good Guy and Bad Guy – which one should you be? Of course we know by having just read the Gospel, Jesus is saying that you don't want to be like the Pharisee – the twist is that you don't want to be like the one that you thought would have been the good one. To not be like the one who exalts himself highly and shows contempt on others. Instead you are to be like the one who is humble – asking for mercy before the Lord, the tax collector who knows he is weak and troubled.

So which one are you in the story- Pharisee or Tax Collector?

Both men go to the temple to pray which was a common practice. We still today, come here to worship God and to offer prayers before the Lord. Both men address God directly, speaking to God in prayer, which was a common practice. Which also we still do today, praying such things as God, our Father; God Almighty; Eternal Lord. Both men offered acceptable forms of prayer, the Pharisee offering thanks to God, and the Tax Collector pleading for God's

mercy. Both prayers that we still offer today, giving God thanks for all the blessings he has shown upon us and confess our need for God's forgiveness and mercy each and every day.

But the spirit behind both the prayers isn't quite the same. The Pharisee here in Jesus' story is like the people that Jesus is talking with – remember at the beginning of the Gospel it says that Jesus told this parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” So Jesus is talking directly to those who think highly of themselves and tells them this story of a pharisee who thought to highly of himself. He comes to pray, yes, He addresses God yes, he gives thanks to God, yes, but he says he is thankful for not being like those other people, those thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like a tax collector. So obviously we are to be the Tax collector in this Gospel reading, because we don't want to be linked to those self-righteous group that are listening to Jesus tell this story. We don't want to be like those people do we? Those like this Pharisee who judges others, puts them down so he looks better, compares himself to others so that he can feel that he is more righteous and perfect before the Lord. We don't want to be like that kind of people do we?

But aren't we already? All we have to do is listen to the judgmental statements we hear every day to know that this is exactly how we and all of society operate in the world. Just pick up a newspaper, watch a news program, or listen to any of the debates these days in the political realm, everyone knows who they are and who we are. Even advertisers work on this principal, to get you to buy their merchandise, you want to be cool, you want to be part of the in crowd, you want to be like everyone else, you want to be like your sports hero, you don't want to be like those fools, so you better buy this pair of shoes, this type of car, wear this type perfume, invest in this security plan and so on and so on. They work on you until they convince you that you better listen to them over the others, be like them, vote their way, buy their products, because you don't want to be like those “other” people.

There is nothing new with this form of tactic – for centuries upon centuries humanity has used this method of putting down others so a person can feel better about themselves. Families do it; parents verbally abuse children putting them down without even thinking many times. A young child is given markers and some paper to keep them busy while mom or dad is busy in the kitchen. Ten minutes later, they look down and sees their lovely, little, innocent child, happily scribbling away with the markers all over the hardwood floors. Then the words come flying out before there is even time to think, “Why do you always make such a mess! Why must you be so bad!” They really don't mean it, but the words are said and the child learns quickly that they are bad. But it doesn't end there, that same child then goes out and is playing with some other neighborhood children and says the same exact words to another child that isn't

behaving the way she wants, and so the put down continues, “Why are you so bad, why do you always mess things up.”

And that child grows up and the story continues, from one to another, to another, putting one down so that the other one can feel better. It carries over into the schools, “I am smarter than you.” “You’re a terrible player your never make the team.” And it continues on into the job world, “You’re just to slow, why can’t you understand it is so simple!, How can you make such a dumb mistake!” It carries over into marriages, “You never understand. You just don’t love me enough.” Even in church these words persist, someone that hasn’t been here for a while walks in and others say, jokingly, “Well the roof is going to fall in.” It might be meant as a joke, but it is putting someone down because we know that we have been here weekly and they haven’t. Or we compare our church with other churches, our ministries with other ministries, our members with others who aren’t members, we continue these hurtful words even subconsciously we do it over and over again. Who are we in this parable? We are the Pharisee, putting on our faith of self-righteousness even though we know that we should be like the tax collector – seeking the Lord’s Mercy.

But the good news is no matter who we are Jesus comes to lift us up. We don’t need to put others down to lift ourselves up. We don’t need to judge others to make ourselves feel better. We don’t need to criticize and disparage others to make ourselves seem better than we are. Because God has sent Jesus to raise us up. Jesus put himself down as the lowest, to suffer, to become the lowest of the low, to reach out to the worst of the worst, to die in a suffering criminal way. He humbled himself that we might be exalted. He gives us this gift each and every week as we come to his holy table and take the body and blood in the wine and the bread. In that gift we are reminded of this truth, this mercy that is given to us. We don’t have to prove ourselves, defend our own righteousness, state our own perfection, because we have all fallen short of the glory of God, we stand before the Lord seeking mercy. And we give thanks that God lifts us up and exalts us by his blessings this day. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN