

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’<sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Word of God for the People of God.

**Thanks be to God.**

I am convinced that this must be a favorite parable among us churchy folks. You know, those who come to church over 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. In fact, I think that if the pharisee in this parable were alive and with us for church today, he might have heard this reading and thought, "Whew! Thank God I'm not like *that* Pharisee!"

Humility is a rough one for all of us. We struggle to wear it authentically. How do I appear confident, but humble? We demure at compliments, hoping not to appear prideful, but even more than that, hoping not to reveal how badly we needed the affirmation. Perhaps the biggest struggle of all is the shame that comes with shedding light on our lives. I am fine with all of you operating on the assumption that I am not perfect--that I have needs and broken places in my life and my relationships. After all, doesn't everybody? But I would really rather you didn't know the specifics. I would really rather you not be able to see the

mistakes I make, the rough places that I try so hard to smooth over in public.

Most of us can do a pretty good job at that. We work hard to craft our public persona, that representative that we send out into the world--that version of us that is always strong and has an ironclad faith. The one who doesn't struggle with misuse of money. Who has thriving, conflict-free relationships with spouse and family, yes even that dreadful sister, somehow we manage to have enough grace for her. That version of ourselves who makes all of the right decisions, and really just tries to spend my time helping other people with *their* problems--bless their hearts.

The tax collector of Jesus' parable didn't have the luxury of a public persona. Tax collectors in Jesus' day were not like our modern-day IRS agents. They were not the stereotype, sporting the pocket-protector, enforcing the rules, combing through to find that little thing you must have forgotten...no, these tax collectors--Jesus' tax collectors--were crooks. As agents of the roman government, they were the embodiment of Caesar's intention to squeeze every last drop out of occupied Israel. Tax collecting was a forbidden profession for Jews, and those who did it were not only considered ritually impure according to the law, but they were traitors, liars, thieves and exploiters of their own people. A tax collector was the last person you'd expect to see in the temple for prayer. Luke tells us that Jesus shares this parable with those "who considered themselves righteous

and looked upon everyone else with disgust," so when Jesus tells them that the tax collector stood at a distance from others, *the listeners* really know that the tax collector stood at a distance from God.

Pharisees, on the other hand, were something different. We tend to read them with an uncharitable slant, but Pharisees in Jesus' time were simply good and faithful Jews. They believed that the law, the Torah, should be applied and lived out in every day life--they taught that it wasn't all ritual and temple worship, that faith was meant to be a way of life. Most people had a high view of Pharisees as holy people--close to God.

And so it's not so far-fetched that the Pharisee was feeling pretty good about himself. The truth is these things that he says he does and doesn't do, well, those things really do point to righteousness--he's no crook, no evildoer, no adulterer...he fasts and he gives. So the issue at stake here is not whether the pharisee looks righteous, but whether he actually is righteous. Whether there is something underneath all that appearance that might be in need. Is he right with God? Is he justified? He certainly believes that he has taken care of that. You see, in his prayer, in three whole sentences, the pharisee manages to say "I" five times. He's lining up the evidence, making his case, because by golly, he's worked hard for his righteousness, and he intends to claim it. If we could change the words of his prayer to a something a little more truthful, perhaps it would be to say "Lord, I thank you for all these things that make me look good,

for all these ways that I appear righteous, because I can't imagine what I'd do if everyone knew the truth."

The truth is, sometimes we choose the look of righteousness, the form of righteousness, the outward marks of a good life and good faith because it's the only thing we can pull off. We can't change the inside, but we sure can make it look like we did. We choose the actions of righteousness, all the while worrying that what's underneath is not only unholy, but unredeemable. While we may wonder what God really thinks of us, at least we can take some solace in knowing we've got everybody else fooled. We choose that look, that persona as a clean substitute because real righteousness makes us look weak--it exposes more than we want others to see. It shows our underbelly, it opens up all those cans of worms that we do such a good job of holding shut. Thank you, Lord, that I'm not like that tax collector, whose guilt is so obvious, and whose brokenness is on display.

But in the end, what we find is that that form, that outward righteousness that we ourselves accomplish, is a prison of our own making. At some point, we have to ask ourselves, Do you really want the kind of righteousness you can achieve? Do you really want the salvation of your own making, a redemption that you yourself have wrought? The Pharisee's prayer opens the door to his own contrived glory, but it shuts the door to the God who stands ready to offer grace.

The Great Depression, as we all know, was a time of great need. With over a quarter of the workforce unemployed, families struggled to make ends meet. They stretched every nickel and rationed each loaf of bread. For most people, luxuries were not a possibility, and necessities became the new luxury. No one had enough.

Martha Gellhorn wrote, "This picture is so grim that whatever words I use will seem hysterical and exaggerated. They can't pay rent and are evicted. They are watching their children grow thinner and thinner; fearing the cold for children who have neither coats nor shoes; wondering about coal."

And yet, imagine this young girl, recalling the daily sight of people, lined up on the street:

"We watched the men in the bread line as we passed them each day. And each day we thanked God that it was not us in that line, that this was not our father, that we were not so humiliated, having to stand in line and wait for a handout...that our need was not so public. But still, when we returned home, there was still nothing to eat. Our stores of pride were full, but our bellies were left empty."

For all who exalt themselves...are humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Today I invite you to the bread line. I invite you to confess, to come like the tax collector, face to face with the reality that we can do nothing to escape our own sin--seen or unseen. I invite you to lay down the outward appearance, empty your hands, and reach forward...and find them filled again, with grace. With bread. With the body and blood of the one who was humbled to the point of death, and who rose and is exalted.

Come, taste, and encounter grace enough for all.

Amen.

Summary: Sometimes we choose the appearance of righteousness over the real thing, because real righteousness requires humility. When we come humbly to God, God freely opens the door to righteousness and abundant life through grace.