

**Attitude of Prayer**  
Ordinary 30c – Luke 18:9-14  
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**The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

<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 lift up his eyes 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."

Sometimes when reading the scriptures prescribed for the day I think, boy am I glad I don't preach every week—I have nothing to say to that scripture and it does not resonate one bit with me. Then there are days like today.

I've spent the better part of the last couple of weeks with today's gospel text working on me. I avoided writing it down for way too long, because I knew I would have to confess to you, to God, and to myself that maybe this all hits a little too close to home.

**Two men went up to the temple to pray.** One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. If you have spent any time in the New Testament, we hear about those darn Pharisees and how they seem to consistently get it wrong. Sure, Pharisees were those so devoted to God that they were strict adherers to the law and wanted to remain holy, so they could do their tasks and attend temple. On the surface it seems that those seem like really great things to do.

Let's hear what he does. First, he goes to the temple to pray. Excellent. Goes to the temple not only to worship regularly on the Sabbath, but again throughout the week to pray. Excellent start. He recounts what he does...fasts twice a week. Wow, great spiritual discipline. In the tradition, Jews were only required to fast once a year. So twice a week...amazing. Have you ever tried fasting from all food? Dang it is hard. I get really grumpy, even *hangry* when I fast. Doing it once a week during Lent was brutal for my family, when the kids were little. I was not a nice person, despite my best efforts to grow closer to God when giving up food. We should give our Pharisee the benefit of the doubt, though, and assume he did not take out his fast on his family.

Another thing our Pharisee mentions is that he tithes ALL his income; ten percent of everything! In other words, gives even more than was prescribed by the law. That is really impressive. The vast majority of churchgoers give in the neighborhood of 2% of their income to the church; only about 4% of regular church attenders donate ten percent, a tithe. Our Pharisee was quite generous compared to folks, even today.

What the Pharisee does is great stuff. Really. None of his actions are bad. Frankly, the actions are to be emulated and lifted up.

Maybe.

This is the part that worked on me this week.

I love going to church. Okay, during the pandemic it was really, really easy to cozy up in my pajamas on the sofa and tune my big tv to YouTube and watch worship. It was comfortable. I liked it. But I wasn't really engaged with worship. I would sometimes play on my phone or wander off to get more coffee. My sofa was *not* a very holy place. I just know that it was really easy not going to church, not putting on real clothes, not focusing full on God even for one hour.

But I love being here. This room filled with light filtered through the stained glass. The warmth of the sun in those southside pews. The rustling of papers from the kids in the back. The memories of sacraments shared, babies baptized, my ordination as an elder when I felt the weight of your hands as an extension of God's.

But maybe the most important part I missed was the people. Oh, how I love being with you all in person. Giving your hand a squeeze, smiling (even if it is often behind my mask because I really hope all this sniffing is my allergies, but I cannot be sure) and checking in with you. It is good to be together.

I love coming in during the week and realizing how busy this place is so many days. After school this place is vibrating with the energy from DREAM house staff, with the activities housed in our facility and elsewhere across our community. In the morning our parking lot is full with ELL learners and their leaders in one of our ministries of welcome. WE do great things here in this place. We have much to be proud of.

Oh wait. Pride. Proud of what we **do**. Hmm. I think Jesus had something to say about that in today's scripture.

This is where I got stuck this week.

I kept thinking about all that I have done in church. My church resume is pretty full, especially since I got started doing things at church well before I could read breaking my first bone in a church, singing in the cherub choir, attending and later teaching Sunday School. I've become a certified lay pastor and joined the staff here in addition to my full-time job at the university. I have turned down requests to serve on committees here and boards there, trotting out my excuse that I am just too busy.

Don't modern folk use the "I'm so busy" badge as a way of puffing themselves up? Maybe it is not such a new thing, though. Luke tells us one story, earlier in the gospel, about Martha and Mary and how Martha was so busy with all those tasks and Mary had chosen the better part.

Isn't this just what the Pharisee did?

In two sentences our Pharisee, in his prayer to God, uses the word "I" four times. Our Pharisee prays to God, but is telling or bragging to God all his personal spiritual accomplishments. These accomplishments have nothing to do with other people. They are things he can do all by himself, including keeping himself separate so he will not become ritually **unclean**, thereby being required to stay away from the temple. It was all about the Pharisee and nothing about

God or God's people for that matter. It was truly a personal relationship with God, purely vertical. Let's be honest, though, a strong relationship with God is a most excellent thing. Not everyone gets there.

But maybe God wants more from us than just a list of how much good we have done. Does God have anything to say about how we treat others?

Let's switch now to our tax collector. Most folks I know really do not like to pay taxes. They don't like being audited, don't like being reminded how much of our income funds other things...schools, roads, safety, libraries, tons of excellent stuff we need as a society. While I personally just try to look at the take-home pay part of my earnings statement and what I can do with that money, every now and then I peek and am reminded of all deductions most of which I elected.

But that is nothing like what the tax collectors in Jesus' time were about. First Israel was *occupied* by the Romans, and in order to fund their occupation, the Romans hired a few of the local Jews as tax collectors to collect a certain amount. The position was incredibly corrupt because these tax collectors could extort as much as they wanted from their fellow Jews to make a living, often an extravagant one. These tax collectors were reviled.

Our tax collector in this parable is one of these folks. He was professionally corrupt, quite a complicated person for Jesus to highlight as an example. Think Bernie Madoff, for example. Our tax collector does go up to the temple to pray, just as the Pharisee does. Both stand apart from anyone else. The Pharisee, perhaps to stay ritually pure. The tax collector? Why did he stand apart? Was it because he was not welcome in polite society? Or is there something else here? Maybe it is because he does not feel worthy.

The tax collectors' words tell us this. After all, our passage says:

“But the tax collector was standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’”

This man would not lift his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast, *an expression of grief, disappointment, or woe.*

Our tax collector not only acted distressed, but he also said as much  
“Be merciful to me, O God, a sinner.”

Be merciful.

Our tax collector recognized and acknowledged his sin and begged God for forgiveness.

Our tax collector prayed for forgiveness; he knew he had failed and begged God for mercy, and Jesus tells us he was made right with God

Our Pharisee? Ah yes. Not quite there.

Our Pharisee did do some great things in God’s name. But, alas, he went about it all for the wrong reason with the wrong attitude.

There is a couple of phrases in today’s passage that really struck me this week.

The passage starts in verse 9:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and **regarded others with contempt:**

And a little later

I thank you **that I am not like other people:** thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

These phrases stopped me short this week. If I am honest with myself, don’t I look at others and think, “Whew, I am so glad I am not like that!”

In today’s political climate, too often people view others with contempt and are glad we are not like that kind of people or those over there. Too often, public discourse vilifies political candidates from the other party. Too often people are judged by outward appearance or place in society or where they are perceived to have come from as opposed to what they do, say, or even believe.

Our Pharisee approached God with confidence. Confident that he was doing the right thing, even more than had been asked of him by the law. But alas, his attitude in his prayer was ALL wrong. Our Pharisee was all about himself. What he had done, what he accomplished, how set apart he was. And while he did pray to God, the prayer was not only just about himself, but also in looking down on others, with contempt.

I don't think God has any patience with us when we look down our noses at other people. When we rank the "important" people ahead of others, when we consider some as better than others. That whole judging thing. God has no patience with that at all. I know I need to take the log out of my own eye, before I can even attempt to take the speck out of anyone else's.

In contrast, our tax collector was self-aware. He knew his place in the world, and he knew his place with God. He knew that he had failed and needed God. He **needed** God's mercy and wanted to be forgiven more than anything in the world.

The thing is, friends, we are all sinners. Every last one of us. The good news? We just need to ask. That's it.

Don't be like me and get all self-righteous about not needing to go to confession like our Catholic brothers and sisters. We need confession just as much as anyone. Your sin may very well look different than mine. But let's admit, here in this beautiful room (*that serves not so much as a **museum for saints**, but more as a **hospital for us sinners***) ...let's admit that we have sinned.

We have fallen short of what God wants us each to do, or be, or think.

While I may not have an addiction to alcohol, I might be addicted to shopping or some other fill-in-the-blank sin. I think our brothers and sisters who meet in our church basement on Mondays for AA meetings, really understand this in their 12-step program. I'm going to swap in our one word for sin and see how this fits, because we are all recovering sinners,

“Whether we view ourselves as the Pharisee, the tax collector, or both. We need to repent, trust in the goodness of God, and surrender by confessing

our sins. In this work of confession, repentance, and transformation, the 12 step programs of recovery can be helpful:

1. We admit we are powerless over sin—that our lives have become unmanageable.
2. We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood God.
4. We make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings.
8. *We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*
9. *We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*
10. *We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*
11. *We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.*
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to sinners, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/sinners-pentecost-20-c-october-23-2022/> from a sermon was written by **the Ven. Irene Egmalis-Maliaman**, of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Divine in Tamuning, Guam

Two men went up to the temple to pray...

Friends, “this parable is an invitation to look deep inside us, do the necessary work of introspection, to move past the outward good works that we do, in order to see our sinfulness – and then repent.”<sup>2</sup>

As Joan Chittister wrote, “Contemplation is a very dangerous activity. It not only brings us face to face with God, it brings us as well face to face with the world, and then it brings us face to face with the self; and then, of course, something must be done.”

I think our tax collector got it right when he uttered a couple of key words. These words have become known as the Jesus prayer.

**Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.**

If you ask a child what’s the **magic word**, they may answer, “Please” or “thank you” or “I’m sorry” ... and actually mean it.

But I think, if you ask Jesus, he may very well answer, Lord Have mercy on me.

The prophet Micah tells us what does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/sinners-pentecost-20-c-october-23-2022/>