

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, amen.

Like many of our Lord's parables, our Gospel this morning turns the expectations of its hearers on their head. To understand how, we need to consider the Pharisee and the tax collector as they might have been viewed by our Lord's audience. Nowadays, we remember the Pharisees as the instigators of the Crucifixion and, while we may not love paying our taxes, none of us would look too harshly on an IRS agent. The situation in Jesus' time was quite different. Pharisees were some of the most devout Jews in the Second Temple period. They took their faith seriously and strove to follow God's commands in the Torah. To put the Pharisees into our context, we would have to imagine them as seemingly faithful members of the church. In contrast, tax collectors in ancient Judea were seen as traitors against their people who helped support the brutal Roman regime and often extorted fellow Jews to enrich themselves. In our context, we should imagine the tax collector as someone who is openly committed to a willful life of sin, the type of person who when he walks into the church building triggers anxiety in those who know him. At the beginning of our parable then, the audience's expectation would likely be that the Pharisee was the hero of the story and the tax collector obviously the villain who would get his just desserts.

Jesus gives us no such convenient story, however. In the parable, both the Pharisee and the tax collector go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee's prayer, though, is revealed to be self-congratulation over his moral standing, particularly compared to others. Rather than really praying to God, Jesus says he "prayed thus with himself," comparing himself to "other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even this tax collector." The tax collector, on the other hand, really prays to God. He has no righteousness to offer, so he brings merely his sin: "God, be merciful to me a sinner." The posture of the two supplicants highlights the difference in their attitudes. The Pharisee "stood and prayed," and from the content of his prayer we can surmise that he was looking around at those alongside him. The tax collector, conversely, stood "afar off" and "would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast." The Pharisee then surprisingly does not represent righteousness, but pride, while the tax collector is an example of humility. Saint Augustine of Hippo connects this parable to Psalm 138, verse six: "Though the Lord is on high, yet He regards the lowly; but the proud He knows from afar." The Pharisee, who thought he was so close to God, was actually far from Him, separated by his pride from true communion. The lowly tax collector, standing far off, was in fact the closer of the two men to the Lord. The tragedy of the story is that the Pharisee focuses so intently on himself that he returns from prayer farther from God than before. Jesus

tells his hearers that the tax collector was the only one of the two who went back to his home “justified,” or possessing righteousness.

Of course, not everyone who strives for holiness falls into the trap of pride, as we see in our Epistle. Saint Paul had himself been a Pharisee, trained under one of the great teachers of the Law and so zealous that he himself persecuted Christians in the belief that he was doing God’s will. Unlike the proud Pharisee in our parable, though, Paul encountered God, repented, and humbled himself. So, Saul the Pharisee became Paul the apostle, who calls himself “the least of the apostles,” though the Church regards him as among the greatest. Notice the humility that permeates his self-description: “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” Any time he comes close to speaking highly of himself, he stops and redirects the glory to God. This is humility in action, the true path to glory.

This way of humility is most exemplified in the Gospel itself. As Saint Paul writes in Philippians chapter two, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God . . . made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” This is the ultimate riches-to-rags story: the Son of God giving up his own glory for the sake of those who did not deserve his love. To be a Christian then, which means to be a “little Christ,” requires that we join him in his humiliation. This is the wisdom of the tax collector, to not even look up to heaven, to not try to justify ourselves, but to simply receive grace knowing that we are undeserving and yet God is merciful. This is the approach we take to the altar at every Eucharist. Before we can approach the Father to remember Christ’s sacrifice, we kneel in confession and admit that we are as the tax collector before God, totally unworthy. Before we can receive our Lord in the Body and Blood, we admit that we are “not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.” In a few moments, we will have a chance to walk with our Lord in the gentle path of humility.

Beyond the liturgy, how we apply our Lord’s teaching in our lives will be unique to each of us and the current state of our souls. The characters in our parable today represent the extremes of our own lives. Sometimes, we are like the tax collector, openly in rebellion against God. If that is you today, if you feel weighed down by your sin, take heart. The path forward is simple: like the tax collector, approach God with humility, ask for mercy, and receive his grace. At other times, we can become the proud Pharisee, tempted to admire our own virtue and prayer. The danger is that we will use our moral

and devout lives to insulate ourselves from God. If you see this pride forming in your heart, take Saint Paul as your example and strive to remember your unworthiness and God's undeserved mercy to you. We need to constantly remember our Lord's conclusion to his parable: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The good news for all of us is that whatever state you find yourself in today, our Lord continues to graciously love you, never because you deserve it and even if you feel beyond salvation. Through the Gospel the heartbeat of our lives can and must be this prayer: "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

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