

“The Parables According to Luke, Part Eight: Truth”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for July 24<sup>th</sup> 2016 (10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 18: 9-14

As I mentioned last Sunday—in my opening remarks on the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus...

...as I mentioned last Sunday, our final trio of Lukan parables all involve a contrast...a contrast between two starkly different characters. Last week the contrast was between that Rich Man and the beggar at his gate. Next week the contrast will be between two brothers. And this morning...

...well, this morning, the contrast is between two men, both of whom have come to the Temple to pray: prayers which our Lord evaluates in very different ways. And it is crucial for us, at the outset, to define with precision the difference between these two men: one a Pharisee, one a Publican. Let's again listen to the parable.

*Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 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!'*

There's the parable: and let's be careful not to make the mistake of imposing on this parable the economic divide we saw in the Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus. While it's true that the theme of economic justice is a vital theme for Luke, this is not one of the places in which it is front and centre. And yet: the fact that so many artistic renderings of this parable show the Pharisee in elaborate robes, and the Publican modestly dressed, leaves the impression that the parable entails a contrast between a wealthy man and a poor man. However! Publicans within the Roman system were essentially private contractors who served the Empire in a number of capacities including tax collection; they were, in short, individuals who could amass considerable wealth, often using coercion and intimidation to do so. Were we to update the parable for 21<sup>st</sup> century consumption, a successful but far from wealthy Christian pastor would be cast in the role of the Pharisee, while the part of the Publican would be played by a wealthy mobster: his limousine (with the motor running) manned by one of his boys just outside the Temple precinct while inside the boss stops to pray. In short: let's not demonize the Pharisee...and let's not romanticize the Publican, which would only cause us to misunderstand the parable, which is not about the contrast between rich and poor. But there's more.

Notice that this parable rides roughshod over another contrast we customarily draw. So often we preachers like to deride those who only offer prayer when they are in need of something: forgetting all about God until something goes wrong with their life and then—when their prayers are answered—forgetting to so much as turn to God to say thanks. However! While that is not an unimportant contrast, it is a contrast that has nothing whatsoever to say to this morning's parable. Quite the opposite: in this parable it is the Pharisee says "thanks", the Publican who comes before God as a suppliant. Yet it is the one doing the asking—rather than the one doing the thanking—whose prayer is offered to us by Jesus as a model of what prayer should be.

Notice one further thing that this parable seems to care not at all about. I have sometimes claimed that one of the most important spiritual tasks we face, especially as we get older, is that of making our peace with the life we have lived rather than pining after the life we wish we had lived. Being able to do that is an unfailing sign of spiritual maturity; failing to do that can often leave us bitter and resentful. And yet! That too, is not what our Lord is aiming at through the telling of this parable. On the contrary: it is clearly the Pharisee who has come to terms with his life (he thinks it's pretty darn terrific)...and the Publican who expresses dissatisfaction. And yet, it is the Publican's prayer—and only the Publican's prayer—that is acceptable to Christ.

And yes! By now, those of you who have fastened onto the one word title I have affixed to this sermon, will likely see where I am going here, namely that the real contrast between the two prayers is that only one of them was genuinely honest, genuinely truthful. For his part, the Pharisee was quite convinced that everything was just tickety-boo in his world. For **his** part, the Publican was quite convinced that his life was a mess. Only one of them was telling the truth. In short: only one of them understood that the virtue of honest humility...the call to humble truthfulness...is central to the way of Jesus Christ! And yes: if we are prepared to be honest with **ourselves**, that call to honest humility...the call to humble truthfulness...is one with which we are absolutely bound...to struggle.

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Part of that struggle is a function of the fact that talk is cheap: and we have all known our share of those who talk the humility talk, without really walking the humility walk. In literature, the most famous example, of course, is Uriah Heep: the villain in *David Copperfield*, a horrendous human being who goes about hatching vile schemes even as he assures others that he is their "umble" servant! And, of course, such a character makes it impossible for us not to be suspicious of those who beat their breasts in the sanctuary, but then make their exit in order to go right on treating others with contempt. We therefore want to ask of the Publican in this parable: Sir! Having acknowledged in prayer the

full measure of your sinful ways, did those prayers represent the start of a truthful attempt at changing your life, or did you go right on treating others as mere props in fulfilling your own self-centered desires? Furthermore....

Furthermore: many of us will have grown up in environments in which the whole notion of humility was brought to bear in rather unwholesome ways. There was a time, and sadly that time is not entirely gone from our midst, a time when children were regularly treated to an ad nauseum litany reminding them that they were “to know their place”, “to not give themselves airs”, “to not think they were brighter, smarter, prettier than they were.” There may be times and places when such messages need to be sent, but not if they go un-balanced by affirmations of the child’s gifts, and assurances of the love with which the child is held. And yes: if that child grows up in a religiously conservative home, they may face the additional burden of having all of the emphasis placed upon God’s judgment of even the tiniest fault, vastly overshadowing the assurance of God’s love. Such an upbringing can render us suspicious of an over-emphasis upon humility, leaving us vulnerable, I’m afraid...

...well, leaving us vulnerable to the opposite temptation which is to regard ourselves as better than we’re entitled to believe! No doubt many of us take as our personal motto the title of that popular book: “I’m okay, you’re okay”. But if I’m okay...and you’re okay, it rather begs the question: “Why is the world in such a terrible mess?” Surely to God anyone watching the events of the past few months—anyone even vaguely aware of the violence all around us—is likely to conclude that there is something terribly amiss. While it is convenient to blame everyone else for the world’s problems, if I am prepared to be honest—truthful—with my self, surely I have no choice but to allow the possibility that maybe...just maybe...I am implicated in at least some of the world’s woes. While I may nevertheless be reluctant to beat my breast and cry-out my pain with the extravagance of the Publican...perhaps I can, at a bare minimum...seek the same kind of truthfulness...and ask for the same measure of forgiveness...that the Publican sought in his time and his place.

Then again: maybe the real obstacle here is our reluctance not only to acknowledge that our world is broken, not only to acknowledge that **we** are broken, but to acknowledge (and this can be the painful part) that we are not going to be able to fix what ails us making use of only our own resources. It’s not that we are permitted to sit on our hands while the world goes to hell in a hand-basket; it’s that we are not permitted to deceive ourselves—or to be deceived by those of any philosophical stripe or political conviction—that they have a corner on the answer to what ails us. In the words of an influential 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher—not a religious thinker, mind you, just a sharp-eyed observer of the human scene: “what human beings have to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but knowledge of the limitations of humanity, of the absoluteness of the barrier that separates humanity and each human being from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight—the kind of insight which gave birth

to Greek tragedy. Experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced one is aware of this, and knows that he is master neither of time nor of the future..." To translate that insight into the idiom of our parable: those with genuine experience of life's joys and sorrows, life's triumphs and failures, will eventually be offered a glimpse of just how short of the mark they themselves have fallen...and will hopefully couple that knowledge with a willingness to turn to God. To turn to God to seek the forgiveness, the strength and the renewal that they know full well they could never produce on their own! Not now! Not ever! In the can-do culture that surrounds us—and helps to shape our psyches—that's news we might not wish to hear. But it's the truth: truth that we most certainly do need to hear.

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I can't end on so grim a note....and not simply because I don't want to spoil a perfectly lovely summer Sunday! I don't want to end on so grim a note...because that note—that note calling us to honest self-examination...and to genuine repentance—is a note that should never be played without a wee bit of accompaniment. Permit me to share with you...as I bring these thoughts to a close...permit me to share a fascinating sidebar about the way in which this parable—the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican—has been put to use in one segment of the Christian Church: the Eastern Orthodox church.

Those of you familiar with Eastern Orthodoxy—the Christian faith most closely identified with the Greek and Slavic speaking parts of the world—those familiar with these churches may have heard of what is known as the "Jesus Prayer." And guess what: the Jesus Prayer is based on the prayer of the publican: the publican who prays "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." In its fullest form, the prayer goes: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner." And the prayer, in that precise form, is used by many Orthodox Christians almost as a mantra: it is part of the rich legacy of mystical practice that is part and parcel of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. That tradition makes use of the Jesus Prayer—which is also known as "the prayer of the heart"—as a doorway through which the faithful are led into mystical union with Christ: leading them ultimately toward what in Greek is known as *theosis*, a journey through which believers will come to be illumined by the light, the life and the love of God, sharing God's own life and God's own glory. And here's the thing.

So often we are put-off by the call to honest self-examination—the call to a life of humility—not only because we don't want to feel worse about ourselves than we already may feel, but because we fear that the call to humility comes from the lips of an "eager-to-judge-us" God who holds us in contempt. But that, quite simply, is a lie! It's not just that God loves us. It's that God wishes to give us everything...and by everything I mean everything that could possibly matter to us: even a share of God's own glory. But the route through which we arrive at

that exalted destination doesn't involve seizing it with clenched fists and an insistence that we want what's coming to us...and we want it now!

No! We arrive at this particular destination, by first opening those clenched fists, acknowledging who we truly are, and humbly seeking God's help as we step-by-step become the people God yearns for us to be, through the good graces of the God who does not merely point the way, but in Christ has chosen to be our Way.

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner; Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us all.

Amen!