

Following a Saving God

7. Honest Humility

Luke 18:9-14

Introduction – Knowing Yourself

Good morning/evening.

[Feast of St James of Jerusalem]

An article published in the Atlantic in March 2018 by psychologist Adam Grant from the University of Pennsylvania, was titled “People Don’t Actually Know Themselves Very Well.”

People have very predictable blind spots: we often overestimate our intelligence and our generosity.

Most people also think they are much less biased than they actually are.

We know ourselves best on traits that are hard to observe and easy to admit, such as emotional stability and other internal states.

Traits that are easy to observe and hard to admit – such as assertiveness and creativity – are most commonly assessed incorrectly.

Honest self-assessment is an important part of spiritual growth, as the apostle St Paul says to the Romans:

Romans 12:3 (NIV84) For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Today we hit a parable about two men whose self-assessment directly impacted their relationship with God.

Their story raises questions about what we do and who we are: Doing & Being.

1. The Pharisee's Problem

Once again, we hit a parable where the **purpose of the story is stated for us up front:**

Luke 18:9 (ESV) He also told this parable to some who **trusted in themselves that they were righteous**, and treated others with contempt:

In the parable the pharisee mentions two specific righteous deeds: **he fasts twice a week and tithes everything** (v 12).

The Law only specifically required fasting on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur – (Lev 23:26-32) so twice a week was a significant additional level of fasting.

He also mentions that he is not a thief (extortioner), an adulterer or an evildoer – which is all good.

In some ways, **acknowledging the good he does is not unprecedented.**

King David seems to do the same in some of the Psalms.

Psalm 26 begins: “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, ...”

David, like the Pharisee, **mentions who he is not like:**

Psalm 26:4–5 (ESV) I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. ⁵ I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked.

Making these choices is good.

David, in his prayer (Psalm 26) is right to affirm his right choices, **but he never trusts in them as his ‘in’ with God.**

The whole of the first verse is:

Psalm 26:1 (ESV) Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, **and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.**

His trust is in God:

Psalm 26:3, 11 (ESV) For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in **your faithfulness**. ... ¹¹ But as for me, I shall walk in my integrity; **redeem me, and be gracious to me.**

David does not put his trust for vindication and justification in his own works, he chooses to walk in God's way, but still looks to God for salvation.

The problem for the Pharisee, as Luke explains, is that he trusted in himself that he was righteous (v 9).

David did what is right out of faithful obedience and then looked to God to vindicate and redeem him.

Self-righteousness is a serious error of self-assessment.

2. The Tax Collector's Merit

Being bad, like the tax collector, is not better than being good.

Let us just be clear as to why Jesus uses a tax-collector as the example of a sinner.

At that time Judea (and Samaria and Galilee) was part of the Roman Empire.

Taxes were paid to Caesar.

It was not wrong to pay taxes or to collect them.

However, being a tax-collector for the Roman conquerors made a person a collaborator with the oppressors.

That still was not necessarily a sin.

But since literacy and education was a luxury, many ordinary people did not know the law or how to do the necessary calculations.

Just think for a moment how many of you are confident about the details of tax today.

Information about who owned and earned what, and what was deductible, was also way less precise than today.

Many tax-collectors took advantage of this fuzziness to add a bit for themselves, and therefore became rich at the expense of their fellow countrymen.

They were often dishonest and essentially stole from the people while also collaborating with the hated empire.

Tax collectors were hated for all they represented.

Jesus' affirmation of the tax-collector's prayer is **not an affirmation of his lifestyle or dishonesty.**

Jesus **affirms his correct assessment of himself – “a sinner.”**

It is not just a perfunctory acknowledgment that he makes – it's not just lip service – all **his body language shows his contrition** and penitence:

Luke 18:13 (ESV) But the tax collector, **standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast**, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

He would not even approach or look at God – he was very aware of the chasm that his sin had created between him and God.

But **Jesus affirms that he comes to God seeking mercy:**

Luke 18:13 (ESV) But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, '**God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**'

This simple prayer – Lord, have Mercy (Greek: '*Kyrie eleison*') – is the oldest liturgical prayer of the church (often simply referred to as the kyrie)

It is a powerful prayer because Jesus was very clear:

Luke 18:14 (ESV) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Appealing to God for mercy with **a contrite heart is a sure way to ignite God's compassion.**

Psalm 51:17 (ESV) The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

3. Exalted or Humbled

Jesus ends this story by again **emphasizing something he has said before:**

Luke 18:14 (ESV) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. **For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

He had said the same thing in Luke 14, when he saw how people behaved at a wedding feast – trying to get the best seats.

He said, sit low down and have the host come and invite you up the table, rather than be told to move down.

It was a practical example about social interactions.

This time however, it is **applied directly to our relationship with God.**

God delights in those who are contrite – that is, those who rightly acknowledge their sinfulness and failure before him.

We can hear Jesus’ point wrongly in two ways:

Some of us focus on the fact that the tax collector was “justified” and tend to **make our admission of sin somewhat of a formality:**

“Yes, Lord, I am a sinner, but I know you love me anyway, so all’s good.”

Others can get so caught up in the self-righteousness of the Pharisee and the dangers of not admitting our sinfulness that we **forget the grace and loving-kindness of God and think he is always rightly angry with us.**

“Lord, I am such a sinner and a repeat offender, you can’t possibly be willing to forgive me again.”

Both these extremes are wrong, and they’re **very dangerous to our spiritual health.**

One leads to complacency about sin, the other prevents us from living in the joy of our salvation.

Living it – Eyes of Faith

There are two things I want to raise.

The first is that **God has dealt with our sins in Christ.**

We must understand what the apostle Paul was saying:

Romans 12:3 (NIV84) For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather **think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.**

Our **self-assessment based on sober judgment** is really important, but it is done in **accordance with the “measure of faith”** God has given us.

Faith is what holds it in its right place.

God knows we are sinners and has worked out our redemption in Christ.

Romans 5:8 (ESV) but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We do not earn God’s love or receive it as a reward.

His love is unconditionally given to us even though we are sinners.

Jesus’ purpose in coming was to deal with our sins:

1 Timothy 1:15 (ESV) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

By faith we receive this with joy.

Our responsibility is to repent and confess our sins.

There is no need to hide or sugar coat it, God loves us anyway.

Secondly, **penitence is the essential attitude when we come to God.**

Knowing that we are forgiven and that all our sins are already covered in the work of Christ does not mean that we do not need to acknowledge them, or repent.

It is something that is not always adequately made real to us in our worship.

I have been shocked to realize how common it is for contemporary worship not to deal with our sinfulness.

Based certainly in part on this parable **the ancient worship of the church began** with something like what we today call the **‘collect for purity.’**

(A collect is a short prayer), let me read it to you:

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hid:
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

What is says is that God knows our hearts and our desires – there are no secrets. We need them cleansed and we need the Holy Spirit’s help in loving and worshipping God properly.

Do you think this is all true?

It is essential to pray something like this every time we come to God?

And we should do so with earnest hearts and not as a formality.

Our sins are forgiven in Christ, but we must not forget that we are sinners and that we need constant forgiveness and cleansing.

We also know that it is **only in the power of the Holy Spirit that we can live for God** and truly worship him.

PRAYER OF ST CLEMENT Bishop of Rome 88-99AD (Martyred)

*You, Lord, created the earth.
You are faithful throughout all generations,
righteous in your judgments,
marvelous in strength and excellence,
you are wise in creating and prudent
in establishing that which you have made,
you are good in the things which are seen
and faithful with those who trust in you,
merciful and compassionate.
Forgive us our iniquities and our unrighteousness
and our transgressions and shortcomings.*

*Do not count every sin of your servants and your handmaids,
but cleanse us with your truth, and guide our steps
to walk in holiness and righteousness and singleness of heart
and to do such things that are good and well pleasing in your sight
AMEN*