

**Sunday, October 27, 2019**  
**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25 (Year C)**  
Luke 18.9-14  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

One of the common ways to enter into a passage of Scripture is to identify with a character in the story. Sometimes it's pretty easy to do, such as the story of Mary and Martha. Most of us can clearly identify with one or the other. Or lacking such identification, at least experience an internal struggle between qualities of both characters. But what about in today's passage? The choice is not so easy. Do we identify with the Pharisee, who is respectable and looked up to but who misses the point of what it means to live a righteous life; or do we identify with the tax collector, whose appearance and actions are called into question, but seems to get it when it comes to his relationship with God? Neither is portrayed in a particularly flattering light. At least not when you consider the whole package presented by each.

Let's look at each of these characters individually to see how they really stack up.

First, the Pharisee. After all, we know from Scripture that the Pharisees liked to stand out and be noticed. To have the places of honor. To go first. Just so we understand who this man is we need to understand that the Pharisees were a sect of devout Jews who observed a rigorous legalism and separated themselves from others to maintain their religious purity. In fact, the name Pharisee literally means "one who is set apart or separated." And by his own admission, the Pharisee in today's Gospel reading rigorously keeps all the requirements mandated by his sect: he fasts twice a week, and gives a tenth of all his income. And presumably he follows all the other laws and requirements to the letter, says all the proper prayers, participates in all the appropriate religious rituals. As such, this particular Pharisee would have been held up as a model citizen, particularly in a culture that valued religious purity. He was surely living a life that was pleasing to God.

While the Pharisee appears to be an upstanding, righteous citizen, he is in actuality pretty full of himself. He is a self-righteous, even self-centered, jerk. Certainly, by his own account, his practices of fasting and tithing exceed the minimal requirements of the law. While he comes off as a jerk, what he says is truthful – he gives an accurate assessment of himself. Surely, he concludes, because of his piety and religious purity, he is superior to all those sinners. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." While his prayer is offered as a thanksgiving, it is actually a thinly veiled example of self-exaltation. It even has a self-congratulatory tone. Because of this, he has no recognition of his need to rely on God.

Then there is the tax collector. He appears to be humble when standing in prayer in the Temple. But given his choice of profession, he is, well, a self-centered jerk. That may not be readily apparent, but when you consider what it meant to be a tax collector in Jesus' day, it becomes clear. We think we don't like tax collectors (i.e., the IRS) in our own day. Well, things were even worse when it came to tax collectors in Jesus' time. In first-century Palestine, the responsibility for collecting taxes for the Roman Empire was generally contracted out to locals.

Under the terms of the contract, the tax collector could charge whatever amount he wished, as long as the proper amount for taxes was ultimately given to the Empire. Any difference in what was collected and what was due to the Empire was kept by the tax collector as his wages for services rendered. By keeping the difference, tax collectors could become quite wealthy. Many devout Jews regarded the paying of taxes to a foreign power as treason against God. Any Jew participating in and particularly profiting from this system was considered a collaborator with the enemy and a traitor. For this reason, tax collectors were considered to be among the worst sinners and were therefore barred from Jewish social and religious life.

Now our tax collector, while living a dishonest life mainly for financial gain, also speaks the truth, giving an accurate assessment of himself. Even though he is likely stuck in a career that is contemptible, he is able to acknowledge the sorry state of his life. In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector prays: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He recognizes that he lives a life that is less than respectable in the eyes of other Jews. That his choice of profession has placed him on the margins both socially and religiously. And because of this, he recognizes that he is in need of God’s mercy.

These two men are polar opposites when it comes to righteousness—living in right relationship with God and with God’s people. The Pharisee feels he has no need for God and arrogantly and pridefully puts himself in the place of God—casting judgment on those who do not live up to his rigid standards. On the other hand, the tax collector fully recognizes that he is far from perfect. He recognizes that he falls short. That he is in need of God’s help. And therefore humbly approaches God. He was not pretending to be humble. He is not trying to be humble. He simply acknowledges his need for God’s mercy, thereby expressing authentic humility.

Despite their differences, the Pharisee and the tax collector do have something in common. They are both enslaved. The Pharisee is a slave to his rigid religious views, to his condemnation of others—thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors—for not living up to what he thinks is the right way to live. And the tax collector is a slave to the dishonest and disgraceful way in which he chooses, or maybe is forced, to make his living. In comparing and contrasting these two characters, Jesus implies that it is this enslavement that ultimately needs to be corrected in order to allow each to be in right relationship with God.

The real difference between the two is that the tax collector recognizes his need—that he is not living as God desires, and that he is in need of God’s love and mercy to help him find a way out of his circumstance. The tax collector is open to honest self-evaluation that he is a sinner and realizes that he comes up short. And he recognizes that God is loving and merciful, even in the face of the tax collector’s shortcomings. The tax collector is willing to humble himself and ask God for mercy. To ask God for help in finding a new path, a better path. A path that is more in keeping with God’s laws to love God and to love others.

Jesus sees the true heart of both the Pharisee and the tax collector. He sees that the tax collector is truly humble for being willing to do the hard work of self-examination, the hard work of admitting to himself and to God that he falls short. Jesus sees that the tax collector is willing to recognize that he needs help, that he needs God’s mercy. As a result, Jesus recognizes that the tax collector is justified, or made right before God, precisely because he recognizes just

who he is: one in need of God's grace and forgiveness. And God is more than happy to grant mercy and forgiveness.

So what does this mean for us? To be honest, as the tax collector is honest in his self-assessment, we are both the Pharisee and the tax collector. We are both people who trust that our religious practices are pleasing to God and people who know our own sinfulness and plead for God's mercy. Very few of us are either one or the other. Each of us can point to both qualities in our lives—if we are completely honest with ourselves. As one commentator notes: "Each of us vacillates from one to the other, sometimes self-reliant and confident we can justify ourselves before God and others, sometimes painfully and self-deprecatingly mindful that we cannot do it on our own. Sometimes we even present ourselves to God and the world as one of 'them,' as if wearing a Halloween mask, when in our hearts we are the other. Many days we don't even know which or what we are" (*Sundays and Seasons Preaching Year C*, p. 269).

We see in ourselves the self-righteousness of the Pharisee that serves as a warning against presuming that what we do is pleasing to God, just because we profess to follow his ways. And we see in the humility of the tax collector a reminder that, no matter who we are, we are sinners and that we cannot rely on ourselves, but must rely on God alone for our forgiveness and salvation. We seek to work this out in our relationship with God, by going to him in prayer. Prayer is not just an exercise in personal piety, not just something we are obligated to do as those who believe in God and follow Christ. Prayer—open and honest prayer—is an admission of our reliance on God and our need for his mercy. Through prayer we enter into God's presence, seeking his fellowship. Our prayer practices and the way we approach God in prayer is an indication of the true nature of our relationship with him.

The comparison between the Pharisee and the tax collector highlights the contrasting private relationships that individuals have with God. This comparison points to the need to examine our lives and be open and honest with ourselves. But more importantly, to be open and honest with God. As long as we hold onto our own self-righteousness, we can never be in a right relationship with God. Right relationship with God can only be had when we humbly approach God, acknowledge our weaknesses and shortcomings, and seek God's mercy.

As Augustine of Hippo said, "This is the very perfection of a person, to find out our own imperfections." When we discover those imperfections through self-examination, and admit those imperfections before God, we give him the opening he needs to work in our lives. And more importantly, he gives us what we most need: his love, his mercy, and his forgiveness, so that we too may be justified, that we are made right in our relationship with God and with one another.