

**Sunday, October 23, 2022**  
**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25 (Year C)**

Luke 18.9-14

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1089304715288778>

*(Sermon begins at about 15:40)*

**“It’s a Trap!”**

As we delve into today’s Gospel reading—the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector—it becomes increasingly apparent that, like so many of Jesus’ parables, this story has multiple layers. As is often the case in parables, two things are going on. First, there is a certain degree of hyperbole expressed. Sometimes to the point of being ludicrous. And second, things are turned inside out, expectations are upended, as a way of ultimately getting to the point Jesus wants to make. Jesus does this because it is the hyperbolic and the unexpected outcomes that would have stuck in the minds of his hearers, thereby helping them to more fully process and remember his lessons. Today’s parable is no exception. We have loads of hyperbole and an unexpected outcome. But there is also a cherry on top, which is meant to further emphasize the main point. And that can best be characterized in words not from Jesus’ times, but rather from “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” In the words of Admiral Ackbar in *Return of the Jedi*, “It’s a trap!” But we have to really delve into the parable to see just how it is a trap. A trap that leads to the real point of the parable.

The principal characters, other than God—we’ll get to God in a bit—are the Pharisee and the tax collector. Part of what we need to know about these two is presented in the text of the parable. And while that is sufficient to follow the storyline, there is more information that the original hearers would have known and understood. Information that would have added to the depth of their understanding.

Let’s start with the Pharisee. Of course, we know that the Pharisees were a sect of Judaism. And while Jesus was often critical of Pharisees as hypocrites, it is important to note that he did not condemn all Pharisees. Only some of the leaders who were hypocritical in their practices, to the point of corruption. Most Pharisees were decent, honest, devout Jews, seeking to following God’s laws as best as they could. That said, we are told that the Pharisee in the parable prayed saying, “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.” These words are a mixed bag. They indicate the piety and devotion of the man. He faithfully followed the religious practices of his sect: he fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of his income. In that, he is to be commended for his devotion.

Where he becomes a caricature is in the arrogance he exhibits. First off is the fact that he felt he needed to “remind” God of how devout he is. Implying that his salvation is due to his own actions, not due to God’s grace, God’s love and mercy. And then to top it all off, he places it in a context that is completely counter to the very religious laws he so proudly boasts about: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax

collector.” He is thereby portrayed as being a bit full of himself. Proudful of being devout, viewing himself as superior to those “other people.” Obviously not having compassion for others. Forgetting the most fundamental of Jewish laws. Yes, he loves God with his whole being, as demonstrated by his fasting and tithing. But forgetting the other part of that law: to love his neighbor as himself. He obviously loves himself. His neighbor? Not so much.

The implication is that the Pharisee, while by all outward appearances seeming to be a pious, devout, and faithful person, is missing what it means to truly follow God’s laws. The words of his prayer are an arrogant statement of self-congratulations, thanking God that he is sooo pious and righteous. The bottom line is that he completely misses the point: of what it means to be a good Pharisee and more importantly, that salvation is not transactional—not dependent on what he does.

On to the tax collector. Before we get to what the parable tells us, we need to take a moment to look at what it does not tell us. We joke in our own time about not liking the IRS, our own tax collectors. But tax collectors in Jesus’ time were considered among the lowest of the low. They were considered traitors, collaborators with the Roman occupation, because they collected taxes from their fellow Jews. The money going to support the Empire that occupied their homeland and oppressed their people. Tax collectors were also considered to be corrupt. This was because of the way they got paid for their work. They did not receive a salary from the Roman government per se. The amount they collected from individuals was the actual tax lawfully owed to the government PLUS a commission. While the Empire had guidelines for the commission rate, tax collectors often lined their own pockets by extorting more than required by the Empire. So, they were, understandably despised by their fellow citizens and considered sinners par excellence.

In the parable, we are told that “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!’” He recognized just who he was, that he has sinned against God and his neighbors. Breaking God’s laws and, as a result, being despised by his fellow Jews. He obviously knows what he has done is wrong. We don’t know his whole story and why he engages in unethical behavior when he obviously knows it to be wrong. Perhaps being a tax collector was the only job he could get to support himself and his family. Maybe he had a lot of debt that he needed to pay off. Regardless of the reason, he knows who he is. He knows he is a sinner. And he humbly approaches God in his shame. Standing far off, away from other worshipers like the Pharisee. Not even daring to look up to heaven because of his shame and humiliation. Yet, despite the shame he felt, he dared to come to the temple, he dared to make his supplication to God, “be merciful to me a sinner!” Unlike the Pharisee, he gets it. He understands that salvation is a gift from God alone. That God will forgive him regardless of who he is and what he has done.

Jesus ends the parable, “I tell you, [the tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the [Pharisee]; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” The lesson clearly stated. Those who think their salvation is dependent on who they are and what they do are sorely mistaken. Salvation is given to those who humbly approach God, recognizing that they are sinners in need of God’s abundant grace.

Those who humbly recognize who they are and that they are in need of God's love and mercy, are justified, are pronounced righteous by God.

Or is that really the lesson? Remember, "It's a trap!" To be honest, the trap is not in Jesus' message per se. The lesson still holds. Salvation is indeed given to those who humbly approach God, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God's grace and mercy. The key is in how we approach and incorporate that lesson in our own lives. Which, depending on how we approach it, can quickly become a trap. The humility trap.

The natural tendency is to look down on the Pharisee in the parable. To condemn those who are arrogant and self-righteous in the exercise of their faith. But isn't that what the Pharisee himself did? Condemn the "other"? A potential trap. To fall into the same arrogant, self-righteous behavior as the Pharisee. But the more subtle trap is the lesson that we take away from the example of the tax collector. That we, too, are to be humble. Don't get me wrong. The tax collector is genuine in his humility. And God does want us to be humble in acknowledging our own failings and in bringing them to him. But it can be all too easy to try to be humble when in actuality we are not really. To play a part because we think that is what is needed to please God and to get something from him. Which is just what the Pharisee was doing, isn't it? In so doing, we merely exchange one veiled attempt to appease God for another. "That's the humility trap: whenever we try to act with humility because we believe humility to be a 'superior' course of action, the 'right' way to be, the path God approves and exalts—we thereby enact a camouflaged form of pride. It's right there in Jesus' [words] at the end of the parable: we humble ourselves—in order to be exalted."<sup>1</sup>

So, how do we avoid this trap? In dealing with this issue of humility, we can find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. Between the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee's mistake is his lack of humility, emphasizing his own work as the means to salvation. What is known as "works righteousness"—of doing something to earn God's favor, to earn salvation. Admittedly, we can easily fall into that trap, at times. The other side is trying to be humble like the tax collector to please God. But unless we have authentic humility, we just get ourselves into another form of works righteousness. Either way, the focus is on what we do. The only way we can extricate ourselves from this trap is to recognize that it is not about what we do. It is about what God does. Salvation is God's work and God's alone. Not ours. Nothing we can do will change that. We don't need to do anything to earn God's love or to be welcomed into God's saving embrace. That is already taken care of. That is a given. That is ensured through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now that doesn't mean that we just give up and all go do whatever we want to do and trust that God will still save us. Because he will. Because he loves us that much, that he will love us no matter what, save us no matter what. No, as people of faith, as people who have chosen to follow Christ and to live according to God's commandments, we do so because we want to. We do so because that is how we show our love for the God who first loved us. That is how we show our gratitude for what God has done for us, for what God has provided for us, for what God will do for us.

We know this. It's part of who we are as God's beloved children. But the reason Jesus told such parables, the reason we still look at these parables 2,000 years later, is that sometimes we just need to be reminded. To get out of the trap that we set for ourselves out of a mistaken sense that we need to try to make God love us—that we need to try to get God to accept us and let us into heaven—we need only do one thing. To get out of our own way, to get out of God's way, and to let God do what God does best: love us for who we are, as we are.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Humility Trap: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Twentieth Week after Pentecost," SALT, October 17, 2022, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/10/22/the-humility-trap-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost>.