

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 26, 2025

St. Andrew's Church, Kitchener

Holy Communion/Eucharist; 8:00 a.m./10:00 a.m.

Revised Common Lectionary (Pr. 30, Yr. C): **Luke 18:9-14**

Preacher: Gerry Mueller

Today's Gospel, the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, the religious leader and the somewhat outcast, shouldn't take up **much** preaching time. It seems crystal-clear in its meaning; it speaks of the proper attitude of humility before God.

Jesus is speaking to a group described as self-righteous, and as he often does, he teaches with a story. A Pharisee and a tax-collector (in some translations called a Publican) both go to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee's prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving, thanking God that he is of the elect, the just, not like some others who are sinners. He is especially thankful that he is not like that tax-collector, the one who is standing nearby. The tax-collector on the other hand merely asks God for mercy, recognizing his own sinfulness. Jesus then insists that it was really the **tax-collector** who went home reconciled with God, **not** the **Pharisee**. The moral of the parable is **explicitly** stated; exalting oneself leads to being humbled, while humbling oneself leads to being exalted by God.

It's a familiar parable, and an even more familiar message. We can **sharpen** it a bit by looking at some of the details, and seeing what some of the words used by St. Luke would have meant in his time. The group to whom Jesus is speaking are described as righteous by their own judgment, what we call **self**-righteous, and they were

contemptuous of others. The Pharisees have had a bad press, and we think of them as **hypocritical**. But they really need **better** spin-doctors! In Jesus' time they were, in effect, the religious establishment, lay people who lived a life of religious piety; real **holiness** as the Law of Moses required, including tithing; they were people **we** would call **pillars** of the church. There isn't a Rector or Churchwarden (or Interim Priest-in-Charge) in the land who **wouldn't** enjoy having a dozen or so in their Parish! And, while most of us don't like tax-collectors, **we** don't think of them as **personally** evil, just a necessity. In Jesus' time, however, they were collaborators with the hated Romans, and thus were **almost** totally outside Israel's covenant religion. Perhaps in today's terms the tax-collector might be someone whose occupation requires some moral compromise, income sources somewhat questionable, but not outrightly evil or illegal.

But even if we change the Pharisee and the tax-collector and the listeners into their modern equivalent, the message **doesn't** change. As I've already said, it's a familiar story, and it's one whose lesson most of us have probably **learned** thoroughly.

I doubt that **we** fall into the trap of thinking that obvious, showy, religious behaviour makes us **right** with God. I doubt if any of us think that **we** are perfect, or even nearly perfect. Most of **us** are

only too aware of **our** falling short of the mark, **our** wishing that we could be better, holier than we **are**.

So, this parable teaches a **clear** lesson; one that most of us have learned. I doubt if we would **identify** with the Pharisee, most of us probably think we are more like the tax-collector. And for that we can be thankful, thankful that God has given to us this understanding that we are mostly like the tax-collector, and not like the Pharisee.

Amen! [*Leave the pulpit - walk a few feet, then ...*]

I've just done **it** myself, haven't I?

I've done **exactly** the same thing as the Pharisee. [*Return to the pulpit.*]

I've thanked God that I am **not** like **those** others. I've thanked God that **I'm** doing it **right**, not like those others who are doing it **wrong**! I stand here, convicted by this parable; convicted of trying to judge myself righteous. I am like the Pharisee **after all**!

But there, I've done it again! I've judged myself, again - this time as **un-righteous**!

This parable is **dangerous**! It ought to have a warning on it, like cigarettes:

WARNING - The Preacher-General has determined that this parable may be dangerous to your religious self-esteem. Danger increases with amount studied.

This parable goes **through** our religious **defences**; whether they are "holier-than-thou" or "humbler-than-thou." This parable sneaks around to our rear, finds an unguarded door, and walks in to wreck devastation! No matter **who** we associate ourselves with, Pharisee or tax-collector; no matter **how** we see ourselves, holy **or** humble; this parable shows us to **be** self-righteous and judgmental.

Both these attitudes, self-righteousness and judgment, really cause us to commit the sin of **idolatry**; putting something else, in this case **ourselves**, in place of God. When we are **self**-righteous, or when **we** try to decide our own status with God, good **or** bad, we are taking over God's function. God alone has the **authority** to decide **who** is justified and who is not. When we go further, and judge the salvation status of others, by thinking ourselves **better or worse** than them, then we are **presuming** to exercise the power of God over them! And let's **not** fall into the trap of trying to decide **which** is worse, judging ourselves or judging others. Both are sin; there are no degrees of sin; sin is always and simply **sin**!

Of course we spring **quickly** to our own defence. We know that we are what we are **only** by God's grace. Of course we recognize that we are redeemed and justified **only** by Jesus Christ, not by our own merits and efforts. And of course we **are** grateful for what God has made us and for our redemption.

I'm sorry, that will no longer do! **Didn't** the Pharisee do the same? Was he not grateful to God for what he **was**?

No, the parable has done its job, and we stand **exposed**. All we can do is recognize that no matter what we do, no matter how we see ourselves, saint or sinner, all we do and all we are has the nature of sin. All we can do is, like the tax-collector, beg "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

And, let's not be too hard on the Pharisee. Despite the distance of twenty centuries, he is **our** spiritual relative, suffering the **same** fault as we, **needing** God's grace as much as we do. Can we **claim** for ourselves a grace we would **deny** the Pharisee? As long as we do, we are like those who place their confidence in their own righteousness, and like those who judge others. No, let us leave the Pharisee in God's gracious hands, **exactly** where we leave ourselves.

And so this parable, so simple, so crystal-clear, with its lesson

learned so long ago, turns out to be not so simple, not so crystal clear, with a lesson that needs to be learned over and over again. What is **really** involved is knowing where all of us stand in relationship to the holiness of God. We may be rather **pleased** with ourselves (not that **we** would go around saying so, of course); and we may feel that **someone else** has made quite a mess of their life (not that we'd mention it); but if we are measuring distance from God's throne of grace, then we are **all**, the best and the worst of us, we are **all** equally far, maybe even infinitely far away!

This is a parable that condemns us, all of us, and yet it is a parable that also shows us the mercy of the Gospel. It **condemns** us as sinners, no matter how we judge ourselves, precisely because we are **not** to judge ourselves; and it shows us that God is merciful to sinners. Judgment and mercy are **two** sides of the same coin; judgment needs to be **pronounced** in order that mercy can be **shown**. Mercy without preceding judgment would be **exceedingly** cheap grace! Judgment serves the purpose of God's grace; it invites us to accept God's mercy by throwing away the pretensions of **goodness** that prevent us from **accepting** mercy. Sin is separation from God, and that separation can only be healed if we first acknowledge it - if we recognize that we **are** separated from God - if we **confess** our sin.

But **please**, remember, confession is **not** what makes us acceptable. No, confession is the acknowledgment that nothing **we** can do **will** make us acceptable. And there is no need to do **anything**; the crucified and risen Jesus has bridged the gap between us and God. All that stands between us and God is our own unwillingness to accept that bridge, a bridge built without our aid, and without the help of our virtue.

To truly confess our sin is to acknowledge that we are **totally** helpless to help ourselves, and to accept the salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ.

That, **only** that, and **nothing** more!