

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 23rd Sunday After Pentecost, October 23, 2016

Prayers By Sinners
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
October 23, 2016

Luke 18:9-14

Three years ago I preached on today's scripture from Luke and want to recycle some of the points that I made at that time.

The scripture reading is a parable about prayer. The Pharisee comes across as a braggart, doesn't he? *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people --- robbers, evil doers, adulterers --- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."*

You can almost envision him dislocating his arm patting himself on the back. He certainly is not being humble, is he?

The tax collector comes across as penitent and humble. He didn't even look up to heaven and he beat his chest, a sign of anguish, saying, *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."* His attitude toward prayer is totally unlike that of the Pharisee.

Many people when reading this passage of scripture depict the Pharisee as something of a villain and the tax collector as somewhat of a hero. That is not the message Jesus is conveying in the parable, not at all.

To understand the parable you need to consider the culture of the times and the attitude of the people with respect to Pharisees and tax collectors.

Both were certainly sinners, as all of us are, but their perceptions in the eyes of the public were vastly different. Pharisees were greatly admired for their piety and tax collectors were the most despised members of Jewish society.

The Pharisee in this story was rigorously observing Mosaic Law and was going beyond what was expected of him. Fasting was obligatory only one a year --- on the Day of Atonement. He fasted twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays, the market days when people from the country came to Jerusalem to shop and there were large crowds in the Temple. He tithed on everything he received, even things which he had no obligation to tithe. He went over and above what he was expected to do.

The problem was that the Pharisee was not really praying to God, he was praying to himself and the public as evidenced by the fact that there were specific prayer times in the Temple and that was where and when the Pharisee and the tax collector were praying.

Those who fasted would whiten their faces and appear in disheveled clothes, according to William Barclay ⁽¹⁾, and by praying publicly the Pharisee was doing so with the biggest possible audience. The Pharisee was not a bad man. His sin was one of pride. As Barclay says, *“The Pharisee did not really go to pray: he went to inform God [and the public] how good he was.”*

Fred Craddock, et al ⁽²⁾, said, *“The Pharisee was not a villain but rather represents complete dedication to observing the Law of Moses. In fact, his recitation of his performance is that of a person exceeding the law’s demands ... Nor is the tax collector a hero. In fact, as a tax collector working for Rome collecting taxes from his own people, he is a reprehensible character, religiously unclean and a political traitor ... his life is offensive. To miss this fact is to rob the parable of its radicality, a truth blurred by popular caricatures that present to Pharisee as a hollow hypocrite but the tax collector as a generous Joe the bartender of honest Albert the atheist, both to be admired for their rejection of organized religion.”*

The tax collector did pray to God, not to himself. He was humble and prayed for God’s mercy. The tax collector prays while beating his breast. Back then, beating on one’s breast was a sign of repentance, and the tax collector had a lot to repent for. He worked for Rome. He was a publican who collected taxes from his own people. He was despised. He was religiously unclean. He was a political traitor. But there was a big difference between him and the Pharisee. The tax collector knew that he was a sinner. He was a sinner --- and so is every one of us. He was humble while the Pharisee was proud.

This parable is about two tendencies present in each of us --- pride and humility. That is what Jesus was illustrating in the parable. The Pharisee and the tax collector both went to the Temple to pray. Both were presumably concerned with their standing in the eyes of God. But the Pharisee obviously felt that he was superior to others and looked down upon them. The tax collector knew that he was a sinner and asked God for

his mercy.

Barclay said, *"In prayer we do not lift ourselves above [others] ... True prayer comes from setting our lives beside the life of God. No doubt all that the Pharisee said was true. He did fast; he did meticulously give tithes; he was not as other men are; still less was he like the tax collector. But the question is not, 'Am I as good as God?' ... It all depends what we compare ourselves with. And when we set our lives beside the life of Jesus and beside the holiness of God, all that is left to say is, 'God be merciful on me --- the sinner.'"*

Those who humble themselves before God are justified and exalted. Those who do not, those who exalt themselves, remain in their sins.

Amen.

(1) William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.

(2) Fred B. Craddock, et al, Preaching through the Christian Year, Year C, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011.