



PARABLES TO PEOPLE

The Pharisee & The Tax Collector

February 4, 2024

Prelude – Who Is Like the Lord Our God? by Wendell Kimborough

WELCOME (cards & community & Jan) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. **To come together on this day made for us, a day where we awoke into our Father's work finished.** A day to rest in God with us, God for us. A day to set our minds' attention and hearts' affection upon Jesus, so that we might be the church, spiritual companions in gospel community, following Jesus together in our ordinary roles and relationships. To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, remembering whose and who we are in Jesus. So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and **we'd like to invite you to church**, into the relationships that make the church indeed a faith family through Jesus.

As a faith family, we share many things, including loss. As you know, last Sunday, Jan Norton passed away, and we lost a good friend, a vibrant soul, and a uniquely beloved part of our body. We are less without Jan, and for that, we grieve. And while our grieving is still fresh and has much longer to linger, it does not have the last word. That word belongs to hope. To the expectation that where Jan is, is where we'll be one day, seeing face to face, knowing fully and being fully known what in this day we behold through veiled eyes. And while there will be a **memorial service for Jan next Saturday (10th) @ 2 pm here at LHBC**, today, we can take a moment to share in our grief and our hope. A moment of confession and silence. So, will you pray with me, confessing both what we miss and what we long for, and then let silence bring them together in the presence of our Father? **Pray with me.**

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 65

Silence is praise to you, Zion-dwelling God, And also obedience. You hear the prayer in it all. We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, Our sins too much for us— but you get rid of them once and for all, atone for our transgressions. Blessed are the ones you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple! By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; Mountain-Maker, Hill-Dresser, Muzzler of sea storm and wave crash, of mobs in noisy riot— Far and wide they'll come to a stop, they'll stare in awe, in wonder. Dawn and dusk take turns calling, "Come and worship." You, visit the earth, ask her to join the dance! Deck her out in spring showers, fill the God-River with living water. Paint the wheat fields golden. Creation was made for this! Drench the plowed fields, soak the dirt clods With rainfall as harrow and rake bring her to blossom and fruit. You crown the year with bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks of sheep, the valleys deck themselves with wheat, they shout and sing together for joy.

SONG #1 – His Mercy Is More by Boswell/Papa

SONG #2 – Grace by Mosaic

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | Preparing for Lent

Much like our parables that last few weeks, we find ourselves between times today. We are between the conclusion of *The Cycle of Light*—Advent, Christmas Time, and Epiphanytide’s ever-expanding brightness of the Light of life himself moving into the neighborhood and revealing what’s been just out of sight since the foundation of the world—and now we are beginning to find ourselves under the gravitational pull of *Lent*, that season leading us downward into those infamously dark days of Jesus dying and entombed.

While the contrast between the seasons seems sharp and sudden, in truth, the inevitability of our arrival here had long been forecasted:

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of pains, and acquainted with grief; and as **one from whom men hide their faces**...But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. (Isaiah 53:3, 5)

Even at his arrival, it was clear to some, where Jesus would end up:

And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold this child is appointed for the *fall and rising* of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), **so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.**’ (Luke 2:34-35)

It seems that Jesus has more revealing to do. Revelation which comes not through lessons, sermons, stories, or even signs and wonders but only in falling and rising: his falling on the cross and rising from the tomb, and ours with him. In this way, *Lent*, which is an old Saxon word for “length,” a term used to describe the lengthening of days that comes as winter turns to spring, is a time of “bright sadness,” darkness entered because it will not last—nor will it be our end for we know that Easter morning is just ahead. Life again, new and whole, full and forever, is what awaits us.

Admittedly, though, Jesus’ fall and rise, and our following in his steps, is still “a sign that is opposed,” even by those who know what’s coming. So, the Orthodox Church has for millennia prepared her people for the Lenten pilgrimage to the cross, helping them turn from Christ’s birth and life to his death a bit slower so that our hearts are readied for the home stretch and, even more so, for being brought home and living there with Christ alive. So this year, our faith family will take some time to prepare for Lent, moving from parables to persons along an orthodox path, **from stories to relationships**, so we might see the road ahead and even long for it.

Pray with me.

PRE-SERMON READING | Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat upon his chest, saying, ‘God! Make atonement for me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house made righteous, rather than that one. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

SERMON |

Contrary to popular opinion, this is not a parable about prayer. It is not a story depicting, "One man prays an arrogant prayer and is blamed for his attitudes. The other prays humbly and is praised for so doing."¹ Though that is the standard thought. Yet, as more than a few commenters and pastors note, "Too often the unconscious [i.e., not thoughtful, too quick, and unfortunately stereotypical religious] response [to our standard thinking] becomes, *Thank God we're not like that Pharisee!*"² And so quickly, and somewhat ironically, we become the offenders, guilty of our interpretation!

No, this parable is not about the right kind of prayers; though humility in our communion with God is certainly a central point. It is, however, a parable about relating rightly. More specifically, our need for relationship with God, where it starts and from where we never mature past. It is a parable that prepares us for the journey of Lent, for the apprehension necessary to ensure we get to where we want to go. It is a parable encouraging us to live now and always at the beginnings of hope, the edges of faith, as one's lost but found, buried but brought back to life—over and over and over again.

Let me see if I can help us see that. We'll start in verse 9.

Verse 9 | "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others."

Jesus tells this story to those committed to doing everything possible to ensure that the field and its good seed mature to abundance: tilling the soil, digging up rocks, cutting down thorn bushes, and of course, pulling up weeds, separating out what doesn't belong. Their problem, however, wasn't so much the work they were willing to put in, but the fact they began believing (even if not acknowledging such belief) that their work and persistent working started and ensured the harvest's arrival.

Here is how we know. When introducing this story, Luke uses the Greek word *dikaios* for "righteous." A word whose Hebrew root is *sadaqa*, which is a word with "supreme importance" in the Old Testament, and thus the people Jesus was talking to. Here is how one Old Testament scholar and theologian describes the importance of the word in the faith of those listening to Jesus:

There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of *sadaqa* (righteousness). It is the standard not only for humanity's relationship to God, but also for our relationships to our fellow humans...it is even the standard for humanity's relationship to the animals and to our natural environment...God's *sedaqot* (righteousness) means his saving acts in history...from the earliest times onwards Israel celebrated Jahweh as the one who bestowed on his people the all-embracing gift of his righteousness. And this *sadaqa* (righteousness) bestowed on Israel is always a saving gift.³

Or, as the psalmist said and we read at the beginning of our gathering,

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the gospels*, 343.

² Ibid.

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 370, 372.

We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, Our sins too much for us— but **you** get rid of them once and for all, **atone for our transgressions**. Blessed are the ones you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple! **By awesome deeds you answer us with *righteousness*, O God our salvation...** (Psalm 65:2-5)

“The righteous person,” notes Kenneth Bailey, “is not the one who observes a particular code of ethics but rather a person or community granted a special relationship of acceptance in the presence of God. That relationship is maintained by acting in loyalty to the giver of the unearned status.” And so, “Behind this parable is the rich heritage of God’s gracious gifts of saving acts (God’s righteousness) and the call for a reflective response to that grace.”⁴ This includes how we respond to God and others in daily life—which usually excludes despising those who don’t measure up in our mind...who might be weeds among the wheat...though we are terrible at figuring out which is what.

Okay, with that Old Testament understanding of righteousness on our minds, as it would have been on those listening, let’s slowly begin to prepare our hearts for the journey through Lent to Easter week through the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Verse 10a | “Two men went up into the temple to pray...”

Two men walk into church to meet God, to be with God with others seeking to do the same. Specifically, they walk into God’s place, his temple, the visible representation of his holiness. They come to the place expecting to engage with God in some form and fashion. And like all true worshipers, especially Jewish ones, they recognize that admission to a holy presence requires specific preparations. Particularly at this moment, they come not to a *shabot* worship service but to an atonement offering or the hour of incense.

“The only daily service in the temple area was the atonement offerings that took place at dawn and again at three o’clock [the 9th hour] in the afternoon,” writes one Middle Eastern expert. “Each service began outside the sanctuary at the great high altar with the sacrifice for the sins of Israel of a lamb whose blood was sprinkled on the altar, following a precise ritual. In the middle of the prayers, there would be the sound of silver trumpets, the clanging of cymbals, and the reading of a psalm. The officiating priest would then enter the outer part of the sanctuary where he would offer incense and trim the lamps. At that point, when the officiating priest disappeared into the building, going behind the curtain [into the holy of holies], those worshipers in attendance could offer their private [yet often outloud] prayers to God. An example of this precise ritual appears in Luke 1:8-10, where Zechariah had the privilege of offering up the incense in the sanctuary before departing to the holy of holies where an angel appeared to tell him of the coming birth of his son, John the Baptizer. In verse 10 of chapter one, it says,

And the whold multitude of the people were praying outstide at the hour of incense. (Luke 1:10)

⁴ Bailey, 345.

This entire elaborate production, full of sights, sounds, and smells, was built on the presumption that being in a relationship with God was pivotal to daily life, that such a relationship was possible, but that it would require something done on our behalf to ensure it was experienced. The necessity of life with God, and the acts necessary to infringe upon that life, on twice daily display. At one particular moment, as incense rises towards the heavens—the visual and scented reminder that our words to God are real and really taken in—these men pray...

We should not move too quickly past this. These men come to prayer at the act of atonement, the visible manifestation of their most fundamental daily living need—what it was (communion with the holy God), how it could be met (by the sacrifice of an innocent lamb)—enacted right before two men’s eyes.

Verse 10 b | “one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

Two men who, to the visible eye, could hardly be more different, especially in this place, both pray. But isn’t that what the psalmist said would happen?

“We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, our sins too much for us...” (Psalm 65:2)

One such person is a Pharisee, respected in the community, respectful in his observable behavior, and devoted to doing everything necessary to ensure welcome in God’s presence and the welcome of God’s presence in his community. The other is a tax collector, disrespected by his community; no matter how well he toes the line in his profession, he is caught in the competing systems of his day, pulled out of his community in his obligation to the oppressive government, ritually and by the very nature of his profession and actions, ill-prepared to come into God’s place much less leave with God’s presence. Nevertheless, both men are here, and both men are here for the same reason: to communion with God, to relate rightly to him because their sins will be atoned for, and to live their day atoned.

Both men assume that their realting with God is vital to their lives, and both will do what is necessary to interact. One, all the things (and more as well observe) that his religion requires; the other, the social suffering/scoffing and humiliation that would certainly befall him as he entered this place. Both men committed to being here now, at this particular hour.

Verse 11 | “The Pharisee, standing by himself, apart from the other worshipers, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you because I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector.’”

The Pharisee stands apart from the congregation not because he longs for some quiet personal moment with God—this service was not meant for purely individual worship but a communal coming to God. Rather, he stands aloof because of his devotion to being ritually clean in the presence of God—his devotion to holiness. The congregation gathered to worship was a mixed bunch. Many, if not most, trusted that their relation to God was vital to their daily life. Still, whether out of ignorance or inability, most would not have been especially careful to be ritually pure. While there is no condemnation (at least verbally) from the Pharisee for

these good-hearted souls, if he were to brush up against one of them accidentally, their unholiness (as ignorantly innocent or unavoidable as it was) could rub off on him, and he would be like them, less ready to be with God and go with God. And so, the Pharisee stands apart from the worshipers (as he would have every day) and prays. But this time, he also notices someone else standing apart from the congregation. And this is when the genuinely devoted prays, and his faith is revealed.

Most likely, the Pharisee knows this tax collector. Everyone knows him, has been abused by him, taken advantage of by him, or at the very least, he has been the face of oppression for them. Stimulated by the sight of the tax collector in the place of God, the Pharisee prays aloud. At least, that is what the original language suggests. These words come from inside the Pharisee, and like the incense, what is unseen becomes seen.

He prays and thanks God that his life is not like that of a rouge swindler (extortioner and unjust, the common adjectives used before the name tax collector) and adulterer—one who has cheated on his spouse, a traitor, another euphemism for such a person's trade). The Pharisee is grateful that the observable actions of his life could not be so marked, but his gratitude turns to condescension as he sees and names the tax collector in the room.

You see, the Pharisee is not merely grateful to God for a life lived in step with goodness, truth, and beauty. Such a prayer would be something like, "Thank you, Lord, for keeping my feet on your path...." A common psalmic expression, one often read in services like the one the Pharisee is attending. Instead, he is grateful he is more righteous, more loyal to God, than others, and specifically hateful towards this person. Assuming the worst of what he sees in his neighbor.

Perhaps the audacity of the spoken words revelation catches him for a moment, surprises him even, and the revelation of his own heart offends his sense of good standing of being set apart, for then the Pharisee prays...

Verse 12 | "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I purchase."

Look, I really am better off with God than others. I do more than the obligatory festival fasts, and I do more than give on what I make. I give even of what I purchase, tithing on items already tithed upon!

After a prayer that revealed his disdain, his contempt, at the moment at which atonement is being made, instead of pleading for God to make atonement for him, to save him from his judgment, to act with great deeds to be His salvation as God had been in the past, the Pharisee speaks of his own justification, his own righteousness (loyalty) as the validation of his relationship with God.

He sees his own good actions as making up for whatever he lacks in heart or disposition. He sees God's people and place, but he doesn't know the heart of God in that place for his people, forgetting that the very place he is in and the time he is there is the time of making holy what is unholy. And rather than resting on that fact, God's action, he trusts in what he can see (and others can see) in himself. He sees his neighbor, his offender, and all the visible ills (and even some made-up ones) that he carries, but he doesn't see what is happening right in front of his face: the Pharisee is missing out on the service he's attended.

Verse 13 | “But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his chest, saying, ‘God! Make atonement for me, a sinner.’”

Just a few feet away, standing along the back wall, is one who sees himself all too well. His life has not prepared him to enter this place with these people. If anything, his choices have made reentry only a distant hope, and a humiliating one at that, and so he keeps his eyes to the ground. Nevertheless, something inside him has drawn him to this place, to God. Perhaps the same power that drew the Pharisee standing to his right, to be there also, to give his life to being prepared for God’s presence. He knows deep within that his life depends on being here in the place with these people. Something in his heart aches for this, and perhaps unconsciously, he beats his chest at the sacrifice made before him. An action almost always assigned to the wailing women of Israel, and only once in our scriptures taken up by men—those leaving the Golgatha after witnessing Jesus’ execution.

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. (Luke 23:46-48)

Like the Pharisee, the tax collector’s prayer comes from the heart: “God! Make atonement for me a sinner!” God! I am here, and so are you. Cover my sins. Bind my broken bones. Remove my iniquity. There is nothing I can do; only you can do. And you will do, by the blood of a lamb innocent and slain. Look what righteousness costs and from where it comes.

So, what does the tax collector see? He sees his need, his true longing, and God’s gracious generosity to fulfill both. However, there is no indication that his clarity of sight has changed his daily tasks. He leaves, still a tax collector. He gives no indication of life turned over, simply one that recognizes he needs God to make right what he makes wrong, restore relationship, and atone.

It’s here, as the upstanding Pharisee, whose commitments and habits were literally models to the worshiping community, leaves still a model, and the tax collector, whose very vocation was an insult to the community, leaves still an affront, that Jesus speaks, revealing the truth of what we see playing out in this parable.

Verse 14 | “I tell you,” Jesus went on to say, “the tax collector went down to his house made righteous, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The one mentioned first is now mentioned last, and the last, first. The tax collector, only pleading for God to act, for God’s actions to be applied to him, but doing no action himself—goes home justified—made righteous—saved by an act done for him. Meanwhile, the Pharisee, confident in what he can do, has done, and will do again tomorrow, goes to his house ignorant of what he is missing.

Then Jesus repeats for a second time in his Samaritan travels this phrase, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The word exalt means to draw close to God. It describes being delivered to God. Like the psalmist said,

We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, Our sins *too much for us*— but you *get rid of them* once and for all, you *atone* for our transgressions. **Blessed are the ones you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts!** We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple! By awesome deeds *you answer us with righteousness*, O God our salvation... (Psalm 65:2-5)

Suppose we are going to make it through the Lenten journey and arrive home, to life through death on Easter morn. In that case, we have to be prepared not to deliver ourselves from our issues, our neediness, not run to our past actions, our right attitudes, and our commitments to ensure our place in his presence, but recognize only God can, and God has. We must be willing to start again where all faith begins, pleading God's action on our behalf.

If we come up to the atoning offering saved in our own efforts, commitments, desires, and dispositions, confident in what we've done and will do again tomorrow, we'll miss what is happening right in front of us, the innocent sacrificed because of us, yes us, and we'll leave, attempting to live on the other side of Easter ignorant of life offered to us, for us. And so, not live again at all.

REFLECTION |

We want to fill in the rest of the story with the tax collector giving up his job, returning what he's taken, and making right his life, but that's not in the story. Jesus won't let us start there or end there.

The offensiveness of this story is not just in the Pharisee going home missing the reason for his going up to the temple, while the tax collector getting what he came for; it's the fact that our most fundamental need, our need to be in right relationship with God, is not at all dependent on what we can do, or will do, or have done...but on what He was willing to do. We are recipients, not sustainers of grace.

We don't have an atonement offering or hour of incense anymore. Still, we do have a cross whose image reminds us of the dramatic nature of our most fundamental need and our heavenly Father's willingness to ensure we have the opportunity to receive it. So, for a minute, let's consider that scene from Luke 23, assuming, like these two persons, you've come to this place to communion with God, to be in his presence and leave the same, exalted, draw upon into his presence, the blessedness of life with Him. How will you pray:

...there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour (3 pm), while the sun's light faded. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent!' And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. (Luke 23:44-48)

SONG #3 – Mercy by Chris Renzema

COMMUNION |

...far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them... (Galatians 6:14,16)

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Christ's body and blood: for us, they were given.

This bread and this cup tell us we're forgiven.

We boast only in our need,

Receiving all we need,

In his life, which has been given for us.

Amen

SONG #4 – Joy to Be by Citizens

BENEDICTION | 1 Peter 5:5-11

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

And you who are younger must follow your leaders. But all of you, leaders and followers alike, are to be down to earth with each other, for— God has had it with the proud, But takes delight in just plain people. So be content with who you are, and don't put on airs. God's strong hand is on you; he'll promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you. Keep a cool head. Stay alert. The Devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping. Keep your guard up. You're not the only ones plunged into these hard times. It's the same with Christians all over the world. So keep a firm grip on the faith. The suffering won't last forever. It won't be long before this generous God who has great plans for us in Christ—eternal and glorious plans they are!—will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.