



Sunday October 23, 2022

Luke 18:9-14 (Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Tony Acompañado

Many of you are probably aware that Vince Lombardi was the coach of the Green Bay Packers during their glory years in the 1960s. He's one of the greatest coaches in NFL history and was known for his outrageous ego, unwavering self-confidence and enormous pride. Stories swirl about the famed coach – some fact, some fiction. One story in particular tells of a time when he was at a championship playoff game, but his wife was unable to attend. The odds were stacked against the Packers, but somehow they still managed to win. When he got home after the game, his wife was already in bed and fast asleep. But when his ice-cold feet touched her legs, she said, "*God, your feet are cold!*" And without any hesitation, he replied, "*Honey, when we're in bed, just call me Vince.*"

On the surface, the moral of today's gospel seems to be so clear that it would be hard to miss. Don't think too highly of yourself like the hypocritical Pharisee; instead, be more like the self-degrading tax collector. Or, to make it even simpler, we can summarize this parable down to just two words: ***be humble.***

But here's the thing – whenever a parable seems this clear, this simple, and this straightforward we should be careful. Because if we know anything about Luke, the gospel writer, we know that he's the master of reversals – from Mary's Song of Praise at the outset of the Gospel to the surprising words Jesus speaks both to the crowd and the thief at the cross, things never stay as they are for long in this story.

In today's Gospel, as Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem, he pauses to deal with some smug, arrogant attitudes surrounding him. We don't know if he was reprimanding the Pharisees, his disciples, or both, but Luke does tell us that there were some "*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated other people with contempt.*" So, let's begin today by taking a deeper look at the two men Jesus focuses on in his parable.

First, the Pharisee. It's certainly no surprise to see him praying in the temple, after all, Pharisees were devoutly religious, and they maintained the highest standards of moral conduct. They knew the Bible better than most people and they quite literally obeyed the Word of God down to the last detail. Truth be told, the Pharisee in today's story only speaks the truth – he *is* righteous. He leads a blameless life according to the law. He fasts and gives offerings and is nothing at all like the disgraceful characters to whom he compares himself.

Then what's the problem? It comes down to one thing. While he is right about the kind of life he should live, he's confused about the source of that life. Although he prays to God, his prayer is about himself, and because he misses the source of his blessing, he despises those people God loves.

Next, the tax collector. It's an utter shock to see him praying in the temple. A praying tax collector is a contradiction in terms – an oxymoron. They were considered the scum of the earth. They sold out their own people by working for the oppressive Roman government. They were greedy and dishonest, and relied on extortion for their profits.

There's not a hint of repentance in the tax collector's speech, no pledge to leave his employment or offer restitution to those he has cheated, no promises of a new and better life. Nothing – except the simple acknowledgment that he's utterly and entirely dependent on God's mercy. The tax collector knows the one thing the Pharisee does not – his life is God's — his past, present, and future are entirely dependent on God's grace and mercy.

Even though Pharisees and tax collectors were uncommon company and the most unlikely of prayer partners, they happened to find themselves standing together in the temple, both looking to receive something from God – one seeking approval, and the other seeking mercy.

And just as we would expect, the Pharisee broke the silence first. He lifted his egotistical eyes to God and prayed one of the most pompous prayers ever prayed, "*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.*" Now don't misunderstand the *content* of the Pharisee's prayer. Everything he said was accurate. He *wasn't* like others; certainly not like the tax collector. He lived a clean life, did his daily devotions, and faithfully gave ten percent of his income to God. The problem with his prayer was his pride. He forgot that *he too* was a sinner!



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Can you imagine how the tax collector felt after overhearing the Pharisee's prayer? He already felt out of place in the temple and was uncomfortable with prayer, and then he gets singled out because of his sin. The tax collector stood off at a distance with his head hung low. His eyes carried so much guilt and his soul concealed so much shame that he couldn't even look up.

Instead, he prays just one line, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*" Unlike the Pharisee, this tax collector *knew* that he was a sinner!

To be righteous, according to the Bible, is to live your life in accordance with the law of Israel. The better you are at keeping the law, the more righteous you are. Now, we don't really use the word "*righteous*" all that much, but we could easily translate it as "*successful.*" If you're good at investment banking, you're righteous according to the standards of Wall Street. If you're popular at school, we might say you're socially righteous. In the Pharisee's case, he's successful at keeping the law of Israel. So this Pharisee is both right – he's not like other people – and righteous – he has been successful at living his faith. But he's not, as Jesus says, justified.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, is pretty much the opposite. He's a failure at keeping the law. He has pretty much nothing to boast about. No one looks at him as a success and no one would call him righteous. In fact, most of his neighbors – off whom he makes his living – probably despise him. And he knows this, and so he stands at the edge of the Temple – or, if he were here today, sits at the very back of the church – and won't even lift his eyes toward heaven but simply asks for mercy. This is the one, Jesus says, who is justified.

Why? Because while righteousness is about what we accomplish, about our success, to be justified is to be called or counted righteous no matter what we've done simply because God says so. And so in this parable the Pharisee leads a blameless life and for *this* reason is righteous. The tax collector doesn't lead a blameless life but asks God for mercy – he asks God to look at him and judge him not based on what he's done, but instead based on who God is – compassionate, loving, and merciful. Because here's the thing: righteousness – success, is never enough. Why? Because it's based on *our* abilities and accomplishments. And eventually we'll fall short.

Righteousness is never enough because no matter what we accomplish, no matter how successful or righteous we are, there's always more. Always more we could have done, always someone who's done more or has more or will do more. And so there's always a sense of doubt. How do we know? How do we know we're good enough, rich enough, successful enough, pretty enough, popular enough, have good enough grades...How do we know, whether we're righteous enough?

Which means that the moral of today's Gospel story isn't about striving to be righteous or humble, it's not about being a success or a failure, not rich or poor, not any of the things we can put on a scale and measure and compare, but instead to simply recognize that we all need God's acceptance, love, and mercy. It's not about you – not your humility or lack of pride. It's not about you being a sinner or one who doesn't deserve or hasn't earned God's grace. It's about God. It's always been about God – the God who creates light from darkness, raises the dead to life, and pulls us all – Pharisees and tax collectors, righteous and sinful – into God's unimaginable and unexpected grace, mercy and joy.

No matter what you've done or not done, God is inviting you to give up the hope of creating the perfect life for yourself, to give up the desire to compare yourself to others, and instead to just receive God's love and acceptance. Because when you do that – then you'll discover that God has already called you righteous, and holy, and beloved, and perfect. That is, God, has already justified you.

My friends, the good news of the parable is that the role of the tax collector is available to all of us. We, and everyone around us, are all sinners and all beloved children of our gracious heavenly Father. The parable invites us to experience the freedom that comes with throwing ourselves into the arms of God, who is already there, who has already found us, and who wants more than anything to lift us up and lead us home. Thanks be to God. Amen.