



Who -and what is God to you? First of all, **there is no single, one right answer to this question** –each of us must answer it for ourselves. We can, however, look at any number of different resources to help us with this question and answer –and then we can use these resources to help us determine how our answer impacts how we live.

Is God like a clockmaker that wound up the universe and then went off somewhere else until it was time to wind the clock again? Remote, not really involved with what is going on with us – except once a week when the clock needs to be wound up in order to keep time for the following week. That’s one view of God – God the clockmaker.

Is God involved in every aspect of our life? Does God know whether we will wear a blue or a red sweater today? That’s another view of God – God is inextricably intertwined and intimately involved in each and every aspect of our life – and some say has already pre-determined whether we will choose the red or the blue sweater.

Or is God active *with us* in our daily life – giving us free will to choose but letting us make the choice? Even when the choice we make is wrong – God is present and will walk with us while we work out the consequences of that choice. God knows the myriad possibilities available to us – but we get to choose.

And, there are more ways to understand God than these three but these three seem to be fairly widely held.

One of the foundational resources for helping us answer the question of who and what God is can be Scripture. Each week we read several passages and they give us a picture of whom and what God is to the various people in the particular passage.

The parable that Jesus tells of the two men who went up to the temple to pray gives us different views of God and our relationship to God. The first, the Pharisee might be like the oldest child.

The one who always follows the rules. Who is giving God a report-card so-to-speak of what he has done. This man wants recognition and love because he has followed the rules: He is

not a thief, a rogue, an adulterer and he doesn't work for the Roman occupation forces. In fact, this man gives a tenth of all of his income. Check the boxes – all is in order. He colors within the lines. If your parents were pointing out someone that you should be like, this Pharisee seems to fit the bill pretty well.

But what is his relationship with God and God with him? Is he asking anything of God? It doesn't look like it from the text. He is telling God what he has done and who he isn't. It sounds almost like he doesn't need God – or at least he doesn't need a God of mercy and grace, because this man can do it all himself. Give him a rule and he will follow it.

But the second man - the one who is a tax collector – a man despised by others because to put food on his table for his family, he works for the Roman Empire- the occupation forces. Yet this man knows what he is and what he does and where he falls short. This is the man that Jesus holds up as the one justified.

Justification can be a difficult concept for us who are used to being independent and able to take care of ourselves. It also goes to the heart of our relationship with God.

Justification in the printing world deals with how the text appears on the page.

If you look at your computer, you will see icons for left justification, right justification or left and right justification. Being justified on both the right and the left is how the front page of the Flourish in Faith insert appears. Neat, tidy, easy to read. Being justified on the left but not on the right is how the Prayers for Ingathering of Pledges appears on the back page of the Flourish in Faith insert.

Not quite as neat and tidy but still readable.

The Pharisee is someone whose life, as he understood it, was both right and left justified. Neat, tidy. He followed the rules and “got it right.” Or so he thought.

The tax collector's life is a bit more like the left only justified prayers. His life was governed by his relationship with God and the Torah- after all we're told he came to the Temple to pray. But he also recognized that sometimes his life was a bit ragged. He needed God's help and presence and guidance to be justified on both the right and left margins. This brings us to the question: Who's in charge- God or us? If we are justified, the dictionary says it means the event or the process by which we come to be in right relationship with God. According to Luther, humans are justified by faith alone –*sola fide*- by God's gracious act and not by our actions.

And that seems to be where the Pharisee goes astray. It is God's action – not our own- that makes us right with God. God doesn't need a report card from us. And if we don't need God, then what good is the report card anyway?

But if we understand that we are fallible human beings – created in God's image but not always close to being God's image in all respects, then we can have a relationship with God that is meaningful and life affirming.

The tax collector, standing far off – away from those who were confident in themselves – can't even look up to heaven, the common posture of prayer for this time. He recognizes how far short of the mark he has fallen. *God be merciful to me, a sinner.* This man – the despised one – the one who collaborates with the Romans – recognizes his need for God and for God's grace and mercy.

Jesus tells us that an honest understanding of ourselves and our failings is necessary for justification. Yes, we are created in God's image, but we are not God. Yes, we can color within the lines – we can keep the rules – but where is our heart? Do we thirst for justice?

Do we understand our role versus the role of God? Do we understand that simply keeping the rules, giving a report-card to God of where we have been good isn't enough and in fact may distance us from God rather than bringing us closer to God.

This sermon isn't a suggestion that we don't follow the rules – rather, it's a plea to understand that God is God and we are not. That we can distance ourselves from God – the source of all life- if we insist that we don't need God. We are too often arrogant and proud- trusting in our own abilities rather than being willing to see how all we have and all we are is a gracious gift from God. *God be merciful to me, a sinner.*

When we become arrogant or proud, we lose the ability to have a meaningful and life affirming relationship with God. Unduly self-effacing behavior isn't acceptable either. Humility or humbleness in the sense of demeaning the value of God's creation is just as much an issue as being proud or arrogant. In theological terms, being humble means that we do not lord it over others. We do not threaten or challenge another's rights. We do not claim for ourselves that which rightly belongs to God or others.

The tax collector knew who he was and what he needed. The tax collection was appropriately humble. Not demeaning God's creation. Not claiming for himself things that rightly belonged to others. Rather, he knew who he was- God's creation- and he knew that he needed a relationship with God that would enable him to be all that God had created him to be in a world fraught with jealousy, rivalry, pride and arrogance. The tax collector knew that his prayer was needful for his own growth. *God be merciful to me, a sinner.*

The tax collector went to the temple to pray. Surely he knew that others, like the Pharisee, would be there and would look down upon him. But he went anyway. The tax collector knew he needed God's grace and mercy. We do, too.

Do not be afraid to honor and celebrate your gifts and talents understanding that they are gifts from God. Remember also that you are human and so will also have challenges that call for a relationship with God that helps keep us justified – both right and left.

*Amen.*