



Who are you in the Gospel today? Are you the Pharisee or the tax collector? Or –maybe, just maybe – you are both. I know I am. Since this is another of the parables that Jesus taught, we ought not to be surprised that the learning isn't a simple, straightforward "oh, yes" the Pharisee is the bad guy and the tax collector is the good guy. Telling us what we already know isn't very helpful in our own learning about being a disciple and how we are to bring the kingdom of God to earth. Jesus used parables so we would think and so we would come to the answers on our own following reflection. We would be able to take the answer into our own lives through that process.

Law school and some other disciplines use the Socratic method for teaching. As the student, you are assigned readings to be completed before class. The professor calls upon someone to stand and recite: what the case is about, what the decision was, whether the decision was consistent with the law and comments on the case and decision. The kicker is that you never knew ahead of time who the

professor was going to call on so you had to be ready each and every class to stand and speak on each and every case in the readings. And you had to be ready to defend whatever position you took or recommended in real time- no "let's take a break and come back in 15 minutes so I can go and research the answer."

So who are you? Are you a Pharisee? Are you a tax collector – or are you sometimes one and sometimes the other? Before we continue, let's remember that at the time Jesus lived, the Pharisees were generally the good guys. They were the ones who trained and studied and helped the Jewish people learn the Torah and live in conformity to Jewish faith. They were respected teachers and leaders in the community. The Pharisees, in general, were the ones who composed the rabbinic literature: the Talmud, the Mishnah and other commentaries on Scripture that come down to us today and greatly influenced our own understanding and reading of the Old Testament.¹ So let's not be so quick to judge and set aside the Pharisees as the bad guys.

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 to the Temple. Check the boxes – all is in order. He colors

¹ Thanks to Amy-Jill Levine. [Short Stories by Jesus](#) (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 170-195.

Joel 2: 23-32; Ps. 65; 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18; Luke 18: 9-14

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. Or at least that's a pretty traditional reading of the Pharisee in this parable.

Traditionally, the second man - the one who is a tax collector – is 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 is governed by his relationship with God and the Torah- after all we're told he came to the Temple to pray. And that's extremely important for us to remember and before we set him apart as the good guy. The tax collector 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

Joel 2: 23-32; Ps. 65; 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18; Luke 18: 9-14

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. *Go, be merciful to me, a sinner.*

The tax collector knew who he was and what he needed. The tax collector 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. So be careful when you judge- there are both good qualities and qualities that need God’s grace on both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

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. *God be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen.*