

“The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”
Luke 18:9-14
10/28/07
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
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Movement 1: The legalistic Pharisee gives thanks that he is better than others

The Pharisee was proud. He kept most of the 10 commandments, but in his inner heart I imagine he has broken a few. The commandment about murder is also a commandment about hate. I'll bet he hated tax collectors. One of the reasons he hates tax collectors, I'll bet, is that he covets how much money they make. Oops, I guess this is another commandment he does not consciously acknowledge breaking. I'll bet he slanders tax-collectors. Oops, bearing false witness is another commandment he does not consciously acknowledge breaking. Though he puts God first superficially, he was actually more concerned about how he appeared to others and to God. His prayer was about him, not about God, and was certainly not about improving the lot of others. I believe the odds are he has broken at least four of the 10 commandments. He may go to church on the sabbath, he may be circumcized, and he may be strict about dietary laws, but Jesus would say he is swatting at gnats and swallowing camels. Jesus would say he is proud for something he did to earn his way into God's grace, but that his pride erases his good works. Jesus does not want us to think we can earn our way in to God's kingdom. We cannot add one dot or tiddle to what Jesus did 2000 years ago.

I saw this clip from the New York Times two days ago, in its comment about undocumented immigrants and the fires blazing in California. “There were Mercedeses and Jaguars pulling out, people evacuating, and the migrants were still working.” I suppose some think they deserve what they get since they are, after all, undocumented immigrants.

I have a friend whose son submitted an Eagle Scout project to collect essentially camping gear like a space blanket, and poncho, and so forth for the homeless. He was going to collect old school book backpacks to put the gear in, and distribute them to the

homeless who spent the night at Room in the Inn. There is a committee of three who sits in judgment of whether projects are adequate or not. And they voted his project down because in the words of the chair of that committee, he thought the homeless would just sell the backpacks for cheap wine. When my friend told me about this, I almost cried. Because I knew the chair of that committee. The homeless my friend's son wanted to help were the homeless coming to the Room in the Inn Debbie and I helped start at my former church. The chair of the committee was sitting in judgment of the homeless, like the Pharisee was sitting in judgment of the tax collector.

But God understood how to soften his heart, and gave me insight as to how to help this along.

Movement 2: The humble Sinner asks for mercy

The tax collector knew he was wrong in collecting too much money off the top of the taxes to feather his own nest. But now he had debts to pay, and he could not reduce the amount of taxes he collected from the folks in his district. After all, his wife owned a horse, and he had payments to make on his Lexus, and his children were in private schools. Not to mention the mortgage note on that expensive house in a gated community. And he had a big bill on his credit card. But he begged God for mercy, and for guidance on how to change his life. For he knew asking for forgiveness without change was not what God wants.

I took the chair of the Eagle Scout committee out to eat lunch. I took my scout uniform to work that day, and when he showed up for lunch, I put it on. I took him to the MD dining room. And we talked about his retirement from being an engineer, and the tragedy of his wife who had died. And finally, about 10 minutes before I had to get back to work, I told him about my friend's son. I told him that the previous night, I had spent the night at church, sitting across the table from the homeless and talking to them, and sleeping on the floor of the sanctuary with them. I told him that one of the homeless was a college graduate, and in fact, was an engineer just like the chair of the committee. I told him he had an alcohol problem, lost his job, and his wife kicked him out 3 months ago. But was proud to be dry for

the last 2 months, and was attending AA. I told him but that for the grace of God there goes he and I. And someday he or I might be homeless. He asked if the boy was my son. I told him no. He told me he was stunned that anyone would go to bat for a child who is not their own. He told me to have the mom bring the project to his house that night and he would sign off on it.

Those who sit in judgment will be humbled. But with God is not finished with either the exalted or the humbled.

Movement 3: Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, those who humble themselves will be exalted

The preamble to this parable tells us Jesus is talking to the self-righteous, probably Pharisees. And Jesus knew that the way to changing their hearts is to paint an unflattering picture that contrasts their proud self-centered prayers with the prayer of a contrite sinner. He is giving us a message today that praising God, and confessing our shortcomings and brokenness, will overcome our pride. He humbles those who exalt themselves over others not to take them to Sheol, but so they can be in the right frame of mind. I do not think he was dissing the worth of Pharisees, he was just dissing their attitudes. In fact, if Jesus is writing off the Pharisees, why is he bothering to teach them a better way?

I have a friend who went for a medical school interview at Rush Medical School in Chicago. His grades were not the best, and his MCAT scores were also not the best. He thinks he got the interview because they needed to improve their quota of minority students. Anyway, an older gentleman hit his car in a fender bender in the parking lot. It was clearly the older gentleman's fault. But my friend was very gracious, and did not behave arrogantly as if he was offended, and did not tell the older gentleman he should watch what he is doing. And did not tell the man a thousand other things he might have told him. Well when he went for his interview 10 minutes later, guess who was the interviewer? Yes, the man who had rammed his car in the parking lot. My friend was told on the spot that his application for medical school was accepted. Those who humble themselves will be exalted, not just in the hereafter, but even in the now.

It is nice to be right, but it is more right to be nice.

Conclusion

Eagle scout projects, homeless folks, and there but by the Grace of God go you and me. Parking lot fender benders, medical school admissions, and treating people with respect instead of arrogance.

Such is the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...