The Pharisee and the Publican

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Hapeville, Georgia
October 24, 2010

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The text for today is one of the parables of Jesus. It is a very short parable, but this does not make it any less important. Just as a small bottle of perfume can hold much fragrance, a short parable may hold very profound teachings.

This particular parable is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18, beginning on verse 9, and appears only in the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 18:9-14

> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, '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.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Why did Jesus teach in parables? When I was a child, I was told that Jesus taught in parables so that everybody could understand him. When I took my first courses on preaching, I was told to use the parables of Jesus as an example of clarity and simplicity. In a way, that is true, for the parables of Jesus are simple stories, dealing with everyday things that even the least educated among his hearers could understand: shepherds and sheep, sowing and reaping, Jews and Samaritans, a father and his two sons.

But in another sense, this is not quite true, for the parables of Jesus are also ways of saying deep, surprising, and even threatening things that his audience was not ready to hear. The parables of Jesus take us by surprise, pointing to realities we might not accept were we

simply told about them.

In this particular parable, there are two characters that those who heard it would know quite well: a Pharisee and a publican. Most of those who heard Jesus tell this story would have had dealings with both Pharisees and publicans. Actually, one may well imagine that there were at least some Pharisees among the audience. And just about everyone in Israel knew about the publicans and their extortions.

But that is not the case with us today, and therefore we should take a moment to consider who these two characters were.

First, the Pharisee. For most of us, being called a Pharisee would be an insult. For us, a Pharisee is a hypocritical person, one who pretends to be religious, and uses religion in order to claim superiority over others. And indeed, Jesus did call them hypocrites, and even whitened sepulchers.

But the truth is that the Pharisees were among the most respectable and respected people in Israel. Among the many groups and sects that existed in first-century Judaism, none was more profoundly religious than the Pharisees. Indeed, it was the Pharisees who were most concerned with complete and absolute faithfulness to the religion of Israel and the Law of God. Others were content with all the traditional ritual practices. But it was the Pharisees that asked, as many of us do today, what does obedience to God mean in these new times and these changed circumstances.

The reason why the word “Pharisee” has such negative connotations for most of us today is that in the Gospels we repeatedly find Jesus criticizing the Pharisees, and they in turn

seeking to catch him at fault. But the truth is that Jesus criticized the Pharisees, not because they were bad people or because they were hypocrites, but rather because they were the most religious people in Israel. It was clear to most people that the Sadducees were willing to adjust their religion and their practices to the requirements of society under the Roman Empire. The Essenes opted for flight into the desert, there to live out their faith with little or no contact with common, everyday life. In contrast, it was the Pharisees that sought ways to live faithfully amidst the difficult circumstances of the time. It was the Pharisees that assiduously studied Scripture seeking guidance for life in the specific circumstances of Israel. In short, the Pharisees were probably the most religious, the most faithful, and the most admirable people in first-century Palestine. And it is to one of these that the parable refers.

Then there is the publican or tax collector. Publicans were an integral part of Roman administration, for it was through them that Rome collected most of its taxes. Collecting taxes directly from the people in the various provinces was a difficult and complicated task that could not be accomplished by the central government. Therefore, what Rome did was to decide, on the basis of census and other data, how much should be received from each province. That amount was then collected from an investor willing to pay for the privilege of collecting taxes and keeping the profit. But that investor could not collect all the taxes from his province, and therefore he appointed others to whom he sold the right to collect taxes. And these appointed others under him. And so the process went, down to the lesser tax-collectors who actually visited households, shops, and farms in order to collect taxes. All of these people, at various levels of the tax-gathering machine, were called “publicans,” and they existed not only in

Palestine, but also in Egypt, in Gaul, in Spain, and in every other region subjugated by the Roman Empire. Needless to say, the system led to much extortion, for profit was made by collecting as much tax as possible. As any tax collector in most societies, publicans were feared throughout the Empire.

And they were also hated. The Roman Empire was not as peaceful and happy as we often imagine. In practically every province there was resentment against Roman presence and power. During the first century, that resentment was manifested in repeated rebellions, not only in Judea, but also in Egypt, in Gaul, in Spain and elsewhere. And the publicans—particularly the low-level publicans who came from the same people and villages where they now collected taxes, were servants of the Empire who benefited from their collaboration with the foreign oppressor.

All of this was also true in Judea. But among the people of Israel there was another reason to despise the publicans or tax collectors: their task and their connections with Gentiles contaminated them, making them impure and unclean. They had to deal with coins that bore pagan symbols. The denarius, bearing the image of Caesar, was bad enough for some, even at that point Caesar did not claim to be divine. Much worse were the larger coins, many of them foreign coins, bearing images of pagan gods and their symbols. To handle these was to be contaminated with paganism and idolatry. Therefore, almost by definition, tax collectors were less than faithful Jews, unclean sinners unworthy of any contacts with good, religious folk.

Now Jesus tells an apparently simple parable with only two characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector. They both go to the temple to pray. Significantly, Jesus portrays each of the two as

praying alone. The Pharisee is “standing by himself,” and the publican is “standing far off.” But the choice of words itself indicates that these two are both alone for different reasons. The Pharisee stands by himself because he is too good to stand among the crowd. The tax collector stands far off because he is not good enough to be with the rest of the worshiping congregation. One is intent on keeping himself clean. The other knows that he is unclean.

The body of the parable consists of two parallel but very different prayers. The Pharisee thanks God for all the good that he does. And indeed, all that he does is good: “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.” These are good things, and Jesus is certainly not implying that one should be a thieve or an adulterer, or that fasting and tithing are bad. Again, there is nothing wrong with the Pharisee. All that he says he does he should be doing; and all he says he is not; he should not be. He even declares that he must thank God for all his virtue, and all the things he does: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people . . .” He obeys the Law, he fasts, he tithes. He is not even hypocritical, as we often think of Pharisees. The only thing wrong with him is that he is aware of how good and religious he is; of how much better than others he is; and especially of how far above the tax collector he is.

The prayer of the tax collector stands in sharp contrast. He has nothing to boast about: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” We are not told whether he fasted or not, whether he tithed or not, whether he committed adultery or not. Indeed, we are not told anything about his life or his actions, except that he was a tax collector, and that his prayer is one of humble repentance.

But we are told—and this is the central thrust of the parable—that “this man went down

to his home justified rather than the other." And to this Jesus then adds the morale of the story: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

As I said at the beginning, the parables of Jesus, often seemingly simple, have a cutting edge. There is in them a dimension of "gotcha!" Jesus tells a wise doctor of the Law who thinks he knows how to trap him a simple story about a man attacked by bandits on the road to Jericho. And then the story ends with "Go you and do likewise." Gotcha! To those who think they have an inside track with God because they are religious and have always does as God commands, Jesus tells a story about a prodigal son who returns to a loving father. But there is also another son, the good son that never leaves his father, the one who no matter how grudgingly, does all his father wants. And at the end, when the prodigal returns, the good son, the obedient one, the one who never left, stands outside looking at the party for his wayward and prodigal brother. Gotcha!

As in other parables, what we see in the one about the Pharisee and the tax collector depends on where we see ourselves in the story. Quite naturally, we tend to identify with the tax collector. We do not want to be like the Pharisee. We do not want to be proud. We would much rather claim the role of the publican, humble and repentant. And yet, as good, respectable, religious people our standing in society is closer to the Pharisee than to the publican.

This is precisely what makes the parable so difficult to understand, more difficult to receive, and even more difficult to live by.

There is a story about a Sunday School teacher who taught a brilliant class about this

particular parable. He explained who the Pharisees were, and why tax collectors were considered particularly sinful. He also explained that the story exalts the tax collector because he did not claim anything for himself, while the Pharisee boasted of his holiness and strict obedience to the law. And then he led the class in prayer: “Lord, we thank you that we have this parable, and that we have also your word and your church, and that therefore we are not like the Pharisee ...” Gotcha! The contradiction between what the parable says and what the teacher did is obvious. The teacher could understand and explain every word of the parable. And yet, he did not understand. Gotcha!

But what makes the parable particularly poignant, what makes it the word of God for us today, is that there is in it also a “gotcha!” for us. What we fail to see is that in the very act of declaring that teacher’s misunderstanding, and perhaps even chuckling over it, we are actually saying, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like that teacher, who did not even understand the parable...” Gotcha!

An anonymous early Christian writer [Martyrius, *Book of Perfection*] comments that the parable shows that “Satan lies in ambush ready to catch you by surprise at the very act of thanksgiving. ... He makes you drunk on pride on the lovely and sweet sound of your voice, the beauty of your chants that are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. The result is that you do not realize that these belong to God, not to yourself.” On the basis of those words, we may well imagine Satan looking at the Pharisee in the parable and saying, gotcha!

The very introduction to the parable makes the difficulty even greater for us. Luke says that Jesus told this parable “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and

regarded others with contempt." In other words, the parable is addressed to people like the Pharisee in the story, not to people like the publican. Theoretically, this would seem to leave us with one of two options: First, if we are like the tax collector the parable is not for us. Second, it is only if we are like the Pharisee that the parable addresses us. But in fact, the first is no real option, for as soon as we claim we are like the tax collector we turn out to be like the Sunday School teacher and like the Pharisee: "Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people, full of sin and hatred and self-righteousness ..." Gotcha!

In other words, we have no option but to hear the parable confessing that, much as we would like not to think so, in reality we are like the Pharisee. We are religious people. We attend church. We give offerings to the church and money to various charities. These are all things we must continue doing. They are good things. They are part of who we are, as religious people.

But precisely because we are religious people and we know it, the parable fits us much too well. For us, the parable is not foremost a word of consolation, but a call to acknowledge our shortcomings, to realize that, even though we may measure up to the highest religious standards—even though we attend church regularly, even though we tithe, and no matter how much we do for charity—we still have to pray like the publican, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" That all our church going, all our works of charity, all our holiness, good as they may be, necessary as they are, do not suffice to justify us before God.

But then, there is the final word of the parable, the word of promise and of consolation: The one who acknowledged his insufficiency and his sin, the one who said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" went home justified. Indeed, this is the central word of the Gospel. We do not

need to justify ourselves. We do not need to attain God's love. God's love is there, waiting for us to come and say simply, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And God, like the father who embraces the Prodigal, like the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep, like the woman who rejoices over the lost coin that is found is ready to embrace us, to bring us back into the fold, to rejoice that we, who were lost, have been found. This is the God who loves and justifies the tax collector. This is the God whom we praise and whom we proclaim. May that God permit that we today, like the tax collector in the parable, may return home justified!

So be it.