

“How Much Are You Worth?”

A sermon based on Luke 18:9-14
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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Mark Twain wrote, “Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.” Some might be tempted to think that this was the Pharisee’s problem in the parable we have heard this morning. He was very responsible. He was scrupulously faithful. Yes, as he is praying to God, he does run through his resume, out loud, so others could hear. But, hey, he is good at what he does. So what if he likes to talk about it? He’s earned the right, right?

Might this be the Pharisee’s problem, that his good example was merely annoying? No, not really. At least that’s not the only problem. He has at least two other problems, one of which is pride. In Proverbs we read, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.” (11:2) Because of his pride, the Pharisee robbed himself of the grace that could have been his.

Rightly do we understand pride to be one of the 7 deadly sins. It can kill what is good within us. It can blind us to our own faults and weaknesses, It can lead us to respond destructively toward others. Pride causes us to focus on the splinters in the eyes of others, while we ignore the 2 X 6’s in our own eyes.

Pride, pride deforms us. Pride, as with the Pharisee, can lead us to believe that we are the only ones getting anything done. Pride leads us to believe that at least some honor and glory properly belongs to us, rather than all of it going to God. Pride can even lead us to think that our accomplishments are bargaining chips that God must honor.

“Look, Lord, I’ve done this and this and this. Now, I expect you to do this, this, and this.”

Can you imagine? Although we would never say it that way, that can be how some of our praying ends up sounding. When will the human race ever stop believing that we can bargain with God?

On the contrary, the good things of God, the blessings of God, are not things that we could ever hope to earn. They come by grace. Period. As Paul

wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God...” (Eph. 2:8) And again, it is written in the letter to Titus: “God saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy...” (3:5)

One of my favorite lines from the Study Catechism reads: “There is more grace in God than sin in us.” Our pride causes us to forget this truth.

Now, another thing pride does is affect the way we see others. Pride can cause us to value ourselves too much, and it can cause us not to value others as God values them.

This is a big part of the reason for ongoing and recent teacher strikes. People notice when city budgets come out, and lo and behold there are tens of millions of dollars more for police and other things. They remember the race to get the new Amazon headquarters, and how the City of Chicago somehow had \$2.3 billion to put on the table to entice Jeff Bezos.

Yet when teachers ask for more counselors, more librarians, more nurses, better compensation for themselves and other school staff, and smaller class sizes? No money for that. Educators notice this and feel devalued.

There are several good words that characterize this: contempt, arrogance, disdain, despise. Perhaps the best word is scorn. Scorn is ugly through and through. Scorn is an expression we wear on our faces. It is a way that we look upon and think of others. But ultimately, scorn says so much more about the one who scorns than about those who are scorned.

The Pharisee’s scorn says much about him. As we have noted, pride leads him to rehearse his resume. But look again at how he begins his prayer. He begins with thanksgiving, right?

“God, I thank you...”

Sounds pretty good. But that’s as far as the good goes, for scorn pours out next. “I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers,...” His scorn leaves us marveling at how the Pharisee could possibly imagine that God is at all interested in hearing such a thanksgiving.

Where is the confession? Does the Pharisee actually believe that he has nothing to confess? Has he forgotten Psalm 53, which is quoted by Paul in Romans, “God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” (Ps. 53; Rom. 3)

You see, that is the danger of thinking that if we avoid certain sins, then we will be o.k. Paul’s argument in the first 3 chapters of Romans makes just this point, that we are all guilty, Jews and Gentiles.

Those, then, who are inclined to read Romans chapter 1 and then pick out certain sins as somehow more abominable than others, and who then suggest that if we avoid those sins, then we will be o.k., demonstrate either that they have not read Paul’s entire argument, or if they have read the entire argument, they show that they do not understand what they have read.

It is wrong to pick out one verse of Romans chapter 1, and use it as a stone to throw at someone else, while not also quoting Romans 2:1, which says, “Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”

Paul writes just a bit later in chapter 3 “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” and concludes the argument of the first 3 chapters in verse 27 with this: “Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded.”

Yet how often do we cobble together our little lists of worst sins, and then proclaim, “We have not committed these sins. But God is going to get those who do commit them.” Such logic is stunning, to think that God actually has the same list any one of us might make, and then that God would judge just as ungraciously as such ledger-keeping might suggest.

So if you have such a list, get rid of it. No list we could ever come up with will be good enough, for all of our petty lists of sins are always incomplete. Our lists always say more about us than about others.

We do not save ourselves, with any list, or by any means. We are all guilty. We are all in desperate need of grace. We are all of us saved only by what Christ has done for us.

But you wouldn't know that from the Pharisee's prayer. Our Pharisee is like the one about whom Emerson wrote: "The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons."

II

Here's a good story about valuing the right way. John Madden was in Indianapolis to call a football game one weekend when he noticed a special telephone near the Colt's bench. He asked QB Peyton Manning what it was used for and was told that it was the hotline to God.

Madden asked if he could use it. Manning replied, "Sure, but it will cost you \$200."

Madden scratched his head, then thought, "What the heck, I could use some help picking games." So he pulled out his wallet and paid the \$200. Madden's picks were perfect that week.

The next week, Madden was in New England, when he noticed the same kind of phone on the Patriot's bench. He asked what the telephone was for, and QB Brady told him, "It's our hotline to God. If you want to use it, it will cost you \$500."

After wincing, but recalling the previous week's success, Madden pulled out his wallet and made the call. His picks were again perfect that week.

The next week, Madden was in Green Bay, where he noticed the same kind of phone on the Packer's bench.

He asked Favre, "Is that the hotline to God?"

Favre said, "Yep, and if you want to use it, it will cost you 50¢."

Madden looked in disbelief at Favre and said, "Wait a second. I just paid \$500 in New England and \$200 in Indianapolis to use the same hotline to God! And you're telling me the Packers only charge 50¢?"

Favre answered, "In Green Bay, it's a local call."

Oh, how our values can get out of whack. In his pride, the Pharisee valued himself way too much, and valued the tax collector not nearly high enough. And he bases his valuation on the only thing he knows about the man praying with him in the Temple, that he is a tax collector.

Maybe he is a tax collector against his will. Maybe he gives away much to those who are poor in an attempt to compensate for playing a part in the unjust and oppressive system in which he works. He is obviously wracked by guilt, probably because of his profession. He stands off to the side, in the shadows. He doesn't even raise his head to face God as he prays. And he beats his breast as he prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

He knows who he is. And he knows that he depends entirely on God's grace. The Pharisee, in his great insecurity, in his thick scorn, sees only the other man's occupation, and he reduces him to that occupation.

His valuing of the other man is all wrong. And the question that is begged is this: Why does he even worry about comparing himself to others when he is praying to God? Or as you can read in the Letter of James, "There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"

I pray that we can hear the wisdom of this parable. For in our culture today, there is so much scorn. So many are so quick to place people, who they do not know well, into boxes and categories, only to disrespect them. I often wonder how so many Christians can gather in churches, before Christ in worship, only to turn around and busy themselves about the sins of others. No, the wisdom of our tradition would have us understand that if we busied ourselves with our own sins and weaknesses, then we would not have time to worry about anyone else's sins.

The tax collector, sinner though he is, shows us the way. He embodies the grace and wisdom of the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

*When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,*

and pour contempt on all my pride.

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ my God;...*

Then, in the last verse, it sends us forth restored.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.*

It directs us toward gratitude and discipleship. Isn't it so much the better to be busy with thanking Christ and serving Christ, than with scorning our enemies? Isn't it clear by this late date that we will win so many more to Christ and his way by responding to his love in such a way?

Yes, of course it is. And that is why, with the tax collector, we long to go home justified, our relationship with God restored, knowing deep within our selves that

"...God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

That is how much you are worth to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.