

A couple weeks ago, a student at Las Cruces HS invited me to speak at what is commonly known as, "the Jesus Lunch". Each week about 60 students or so meet for lunch in one of the classrooms where they pray, enjoy fellowship and hear a message from a guest speaker. When I spoke, I began by asking for everyone who is a Christian to raise their hand, and everybody's hand in the room went up. Then I asked them, "So what is it that makes **you** a Christian?" I was expecting to hear answers like, because I believe in Jesus, got baptized and joined the church, or I sing in the choir and worship every Sunday, or our youth group helps people on mission trips, or I pray, read and study my Bible regularly ... **something about trying to live out their Christian faith.** But instead, a very impressive young man explained to everyone, it's because I know I am a sinner, but by accepting God's grace I am growing spiritually as I'm guided by the Spirit, through Scripture, prayer and life in Christian community, and bearing witness to what God has done & is doing in my life. After hearing that remarkable answer, I wanted to know if he intended to become a preacher someday.

Pastors love to preach on our familiar favorites that inspire and comfort in times of trouble or distress. And there are lots of wonderful and uplifting stories in the Bible, but this parable that we read from Luke 18 is probably not among those most cherished texts. Luke 18 is a difficult, challenging and even scandalous passage, and the author of Luke makes it even worse by explaining exactly how the text is intended to be interpreted.

Luke 18:9

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

Jesus begins his parable by telling about two characters,

Luke 18:10

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

In the Gospels, it was generally the Pharisees who were most opposed to Jesus, as guardians of Jewish tradition and religious authority. **But it's not that they intended to oppose the will and work of God.** Back during the Babylonian Exile, with the destruction of the Temple and all of Jerusalem, a religious sect arose from within **to protect Judaism with a renewed focus on righteousness before God**, through very strict and detailed obedience to OT Law & purity, and by separation from all foreign or non-Jewish influences, to avoid any taint of compromise or sinful contamination. The word "Pharisee" literally means "the separate ones", and their goal was to achieve righteousness through their faithful diligence, obedience and religious effort. In the New Testament the Pharisees are often portrayed as the petty and fastidious hypocrites who opposed Jesus, but that's not an entirely fair or accurate picture... because as a group, the Pharisees were totally committed to God, with lives dedicated to faithful adherence to the Law, trying to obey God in every possible way and detail. In this parable, the Pharisee, who worked hard at religion, represents the very peak and pinnacle of Jewish piety. He would have been highly respected and honored by all. He did all the right and religious things, and held in disdain those others, who did not.

And in contrast to this Pharisee, the tax collector was the lowest of the lowest of any outcast. As collaborators with the hated and brutal Roman occupation, they were seen as traitors for willingly working with the enemy and who enriched themselves by exploiting their own neighbors. Under that system, a specific amount had to be collected for Rome, but anything extra they managed to collect was additional profit for the tax-collector to keep which led to terrible abuse and dishonesty... so they were despised & shunned by most decent and godly people. As much as the Pharisee modeled exemplary religious practice, so much more so the tax collector exemplified sinfulness and living a life that **obliterated the commandments of God.** Those hearing this parable would easily recognize the extreme ethical distance and moral distinction between these two men. One was a godly man and the other was a notorious sinner. They were at opposite ends of the moral and religious spectrum... but listen to the prayer of the Pharisee,

Luke 18:11-12

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.'

The Pharisee was so focused on his moral superiority over the tax collector, that his prayer became a reminder to God of how good he was. "Thank you Lord, that I am not like that sinful fellow over there for by my pious and godly

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achievement I really am way better, and far more righteous and godly than that sinful tax collector, standing back there. "Surely you must be pleased by the diligence of my good works, and grateful, that I am not a sinner and outcast like him. Problem is, more than a prayer addressed in humility to God, he comes before God confidently asking for nothing, for he sees no need for anything beyond what his own piety can provide, since he's quite certain he's more than good enough to please God.

In unmistakable contrast, almost hiding in the back-shadows, the tax-collector can barely speak, he's desperate. He knows his depravity, shameful compromises he's made, the short-sighted decisions, the sludge of his life, and has no good or godly works that he can claim. He does not offer any excuses or plead any good deeds, but all he can do is ask for God's mercy and pardon.

Luke 18:13

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!'

In that culture, the Pharisee was a most impressive religious hero. The listeners would assume he was the one more pleasing to God. And the way Jesus tells this parable, he is hooking them in, and they were probably even nodding in agreement as he spoke. But the story does not turn out as everyone expected, **when Jesus gets downright subversive,**

Luke 18:14

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.

Having heard this parable many times before, we may miss some of the edge and shock that his listeners would have heard... **when Jesus turned their expectations and assumptions upside down by radically redefining what it means to be righteous, to be justified before God.** The Pharisee looked down and despised those unsavory others, those he deemed less worthy and less deserving than he... and in his self-righteous arrogance, **his focus was more on his own godly goodness than the gracious love & mercy of God.** He was satisfied with himself and not trying to grow in his faith, and so he was trusting more in his own good and righteousness, than he was recognizing and acknowledging his own need as a sinner who had fallen short of the glory of God. He didn't really worship God. He was too impressed with himself... and so the very religious man left the temple that day unchanged and no different than when he first entered.

The Pharisee had enough religion to be virtuous and impressive, but not enough truth and understanding to be humble, and so his external piety & self-righteousness drove him to be judgmental, proud and presumptive in prayer ... **and he left the temple that day no different than how he came in, and I thank God that I am not at all like that Pharisee.** The picture of grace that Jesus paints with this parable can be difficult for those who serve to hear and accept.

As a friend and pastor I know wrote in an email about this passage:

"I know it's salvation by grace. But what's the point of trying to live a life that would please God if it doesn't matter? Unless it's about being humble in our efforts. The tax collector can live every week like the wretched thief and rogue that he is, come in and say his humble prayer and still be okay with God? It seems to me, if he knows he needs mercy, then he must see room for improvement. That's the scandal of the Gospel for me. Gee whiz, if you're sorry, seems like you'd make some effort toward changing who you are and what you do... or else maybe you're not really sorry at all. Why am I trying to be so darn good and God-pleasing for anyway? I hate this parable... Lord, please have mercy on me, a sinner ... because I know I am more humble than the guy in the parable."

It is part of our fallen-human nature to overemphasize our part and our responsibility for all our successes, wins and blessings, and so we fail to focus on the true Source of all good things, **supposing that God loves us a bit more for all the good we do.** But throughout the Bible, God seems to take great delight, in overcoming and reversing human pride and expectations, recognizing value and worth beneath our human façade & veneer, **rather than the outward and impressive that we would chose.** It is God's gracious love that re-appraises our hidden worth, declares by God's choice that we are valued, priceless & loved, which calls us to gratitude, **not a sense of superiority.** We are called to recognize who we are & what we are and who God is, that we fall short of God's glorious intent for our lives- we sin, and yet God moves toward a growing & intimate relationship with us and builds something wonderful by transforming

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us and our lives. The danger is that like the Pharisee, our prideful self-righteousness can block our connection with God and cut-off that intimacy... for to be full of ourselves **leaves too little room for God's grace**. God has chosen you. God has chosen me. God chose all he created. God chose each of us to be his own precious treasured possession **not because we are worthy or qualified or deserve it, but simply because God set his heart on us – because God loves us**. So if you came here today and are feeling a little misshapen, deformed, defective or less valued, than you really have come to exactly the right place... **for we are all here, only by the sovereign grace of our God overcoming all human boundaries to reach us with grace**. Our call & challenge as those whose life has been touched by Jesus, is to be a people capable of receiving healing transformation and capable of faithfully reflecting God's grace and joy. All around us, in this community of Las Cruces and our world, people cry out in hopelessness, loneliness, despair and need. As Jesus has reached out to us with His love, mercy and acceptance, the question is, will we respond and live out that same grace? **And we can't unless we accept and allow God's grace to come inside**. Allow me to suggest three specific lessons drawn from this parable:

**First:** I need to think and rethink about how I feel about grace, especially toward those I see as unworthy and hopelessly lost. If I can't see my own desperation and need for God's grace, my own pride and self-righteousness will cut-off the flow of God-righteousness.

**Second:** I need to give up any sense of superiority and arrogant self-righteousness. It is never a good idea to compare ourselves to others, for that can only lead to self-righteousness or to envy... and I too need God's gracious help & mercy as much as anyone else.

**Third:** I need to relax a lot more and just enjoy God's love. Our call is to serve with joy and fulfillment and pleasure not to be so driven to impress or earn God's gracious acceptance and not be so driven by fear, guilt or shame, or anything else... but take pleasure in joyfully serving and walking with God.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in

Romans 15:13

*May the God of hope fill us all with such joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*