

Deuteronomy 7:6-9, 8:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.

Luke 18:9-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

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.”

Imagine from your youth, choosing up teams to play a game or sport.
Each side trying to pick the strongest and most athletic,
each going for the best, the most coordinated and skillful,
so that your team has the best chance of winning.

Generally that’s how we select & evaluate other people in this world.

But one of the great lessons we see throughout Scripture,
is that God seems to delight in reversing our human expectations,
and calling the most unlikely folks, unqualified it would seem,
to accomplish the most astounding and extraordinary tasks...
... consider Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, Esther, the 12 disciples or even Paul.

God's choices seem to have very little to do with proven talents,
and clearly, not the skills or track record that we would look for.
Obviously God chooses for his own reasons.

It is along those same lines, for God's own intentions and reasons
that Israel was chosen, set apart by God, for God's own purpose...
... as Moses explained to them
just before they crossed into the Promised Land. vs. 6

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your **God has chosen you** out of all the peoples on earth
to be his people, his treasured possession.

When I used to teach Old Testament at a community college,
one of the questions that always came up every semester,
was that some student would ask, "**So why Israel?**"

Why did God choose them, instead of the Babylonians or Romans?
Why not the Egyptians, the Moabites or even the Philistines?
What was it about Israel that made them God’s chosen people?

My standard answer was to quote this Deuteronomy passage, vs. 7-8

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you— for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you ... **It was because the Lord loved you ...**

For no clear, obvious explanation or understandable reason,
God simply chose to love and to show grace to Israel,
and ultimately, **to bless & heal the world through Israel.**

God choosing Israel though they were the weakest and least likely,
served to reveal God's power because whatever success they did have
could have been accomplished only through the Lord God,
for powerless slaves & outcasts could not achieve much on their own.

As the Apostle Paul explained to the Church in Corinth, 1 Cor. 1:25~29,

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength ... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ... **so that no one might boast in the presence of God.**

One time a church member wrote a very kind note to her pastor,
that his was the very best preaching that she'd ever heard.

When the pleased pastor showed the note to his wife, he boasted,

"You know, I wonder how many truly great preachers there are?"

She replied, "*Probably at least one less than you think.*"

That reminds me of some lines of Mac Davis's old country-western hit,

'Oh Lord it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way.'
and 'Oh Lord it's hard to be humble but I'm doing the best I can.'

When we are prosperous and our life is running smoothly for us,
sometimes we suppose that it's what we've earned or deserve,
that we must be somehow superior and better than the rest,
leading to a prideful arrogance that distorts our vision...

... which is really what is going on in the parable that Jesus told.

It's a parable of contrast and reversal of expectations. vs. 9-10

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.

In the New Testament Gospels, the Pharisees are most often portrayed

as the petty and fastidious hypocrites who always opposed Jesus,

but that may not be the full picture nor entirely accurate.

The word "Pharisee" means "the separate ones",

and their goal was to achieve righteousness through

their faithful diligence, obedience and religious effort.

As a group, the Pharisees were totally committed to God,

with lives dedicated to faithful adherence to the Law of Moses,

and trying to obey God in every possible way and detail.

They worked hard at getting their religion right which included

rejecting & carefully avoiding the influences of those who did not.

In the parable Jesus told in Luke 18,

the Pharisee represents the very peak and pinnacle of Jewish piety.

He would have been highly respected and held in honor.

**He did all the right and religious things,
and those 'others' who did not, he held in disdain.**

When Jesus said that a Pharisee went up to the Temple to pray

it was a familiar and respected image to his listeners.

In sharp contrast, a tax collector was the lowest of the low,
a collaborator with the hated and brutal Roman occupation.

A tax collector was commissioned by the Romans as their tax-agent,

responsible to collect a certain amount of \$ as tribute for Rome,
and anything extra that they could extract by taxation
was the tax-collector's profit to keep for himself---

--- which led to terrible abuse and dishonesty.

The listeners hearing this parable would recognize the contrast,

ethical distance and moral distinction between these two men

the one a godly man, and the other a most notorious sinner.

Coming from opposite ends of the moral and religious spectrum,

according to the parable, they both go up to the Temple to pray.

The Pharisee representing all-out effort to achieve righteousness,

found a place of status to stand apart from the congregation,
too spiritual, holy and special to mingle with the unworthy...

... while the tax-collector as an outcast quietly slips in the back,

knowing he's a sinner having no good deeds to appease the Lord.

As described by Jesus, it's a familiar scene with clear expectations.

Notice however, the sharp contrast between the two men's prayers.

First the Pharisee, vs. 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's prayer is really a boast and reminder to God
of his religious achievements, all the stuff he's doing right.

It is a very impressive list
of total focus on obedience to all the religious rituals,
and **even exceeding the requirements of the Law.**

If you could possibly earn or achieve righteousness, this man did.

But with his focus is set on his superiority over the tax collector.

His prayer is little more than a statement of how good he is,
especially compared to the sin & depravity of the other guy.

In his prayer, he asks God for nothing – for he recognizes no need.

He seeks nothing beyond what his own piety can provide

for he's quite certain he's righteous enough to please God,

and surely God appreciates & agrees with his critical observation.

"Thank you Lord, that I am not like that sinful man over there

for by my pious and godly achievement I really am way better,
and I am so much more of a righteous, good and godly man
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."

In unmistakable contrast,

the tax-collector can barely speak, he's so desperate and sorry.
He knows the shameful compromises & mistakes he has made,
the short-sighted decisions, the sludge of his life,
and that he has no good works or deeds he can claim.

It's pitiful. He's got nothing to offer. He just begs for mercy. vs. 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!'

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...

... and we'll miss the point of the parable if we don't appreciate

the ethical distance and distinction between these two men.

At this point in the parable, his listeners are nodding in agreement

as Jesus tells the story, describing the scene and events...

... **he's hooked them, it's a picture that makes sense to them.**

But it's really a trap, as Jesus gets down right subversive,

and the story turns in a way that no one was expecting, vs. 14

I tell you; this man (the tax-collector) 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.

As I reflect on the life and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels,

he consistently proclaimed a God who **already loves us all,**

even the outcast and sinner, the lost and most unlikely.

Jesus reaches out to lost and rejected sinners with gracious love,

even before they can respond with any good deeds or works of faith.

By his own life-example, in parable and preaching, Jesus describes

a God who by grace seeks the lost, the broken & damaged

regardless of their past sins, mistakes and failures.

The message that Jesus lived, taught, **and gave us to proclaim,**

is that God does love us, he loves us each and every one of us,

regardless of our situation, our past or the trouble we are in.

And perhaps, our familiarity with this passage may have smoothed

some of the edge and shock that his listeners would have experienced

when they first heard the story of this parable Jesus told.

The parable turns expectations and appearances upside down,

by radically redefining what God demands and desires,

and what it takes to be righteous, justified before God.

In the parable, **this Pharisee has just enough religion**

to appear externally virtuous, good and outwardly moral,

yet not enough to be humble and grateful to God...

... and so this very religious man left the temple that day

not justified, and **no different than from how he came in...**

... so full of himself that it didn't leave room enough for God's grace.

True righteousness isn't earned or achieved by our good works,

but comes only by grace, justification is a free gift from God.

God wants to have a growing intimate relationship with us,

to build something wonderful by transforming our lives.

God has chosen you and chosen me. If created by God, then loved by God.

God chose each of us to be his own precious treasured possession

not because we are worthy or are qualified or that we deserve it.

It's simply because God set his heart on us – because God loves us.

So, if you came here today and are feeling a little lost or misshapen,

ashamed, deformed, defective, broken, wounded or less valuable,

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 mercy.

But sometimes this wonderful grace that we so welcome and receive,

sometimes we may set limits or deny toward certain **unsavory others,**

to those we deem as less worthy or judge as less deserving than us...

... like Jonah, upset that God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh.

The danger is that like the Pharisee, pride and self-righteousness

can block our connection with God and even cut off that intimacy,

for to be full of ourselves leaves too little room for God's grace.

Our call and challenge

is that as those whose life has been touched by Jesus Christ,

now, we must be the affirming and inviting people of God,

a touching and compassionate community of gracious hope.

All around us, in this community of Las Cruces and in 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?

Our call and challenge is to be a people capable of grace and welcome

who do faithfully, authentically & generously reflect God's grace

as we are learning to walk ever more faithfully with our God.

Through this parable, Jesus is teaching,

that as soon as I look around and judge someone else as unworthy,

or as soon as I recognize a Pharisee in someone and condemn them,

I have become a Pharisee basking in my self-righteousness.

And that is the truly difficult and subversive point of this parable.

So let me suggest some practical lessons I draw from this parable.

1st I need to think and rethink how I feel about God's free grace,
especially toward those I see as unworthy and hopelessly lost...

... because despite our sinful ways, our worst failures and mistakes,
God still finds something in all of us worthy to love and to heal,
an undeserved loving commitment rooted in the very nature of God.

2nd And the truth is, concerning God's unrelenting gracious love,
it has the power to transform everything about our lives & living...
... as God intervenes and grace reorients our lives.

3rd I need to give up any sense of superiority or self-righteousness.
It is never a good idea to compare ourselves to others,
for that can only lead to self-righteousness or to envy.

Our call is to celebrate with wonder and delight and open fellowship
by offering our absolute best in response to God's grace,
and by taking more pleasure in joyfully serving God
as grateful participants in the mission of the Church.

So today, let us consider, our relationships as a church family,
and where and to whom do I need to show more grace and compassion?

Where do I need to let God's grace open and soften my heart?
and become less like a TSA agent screening at the airport?

Where do my words, my attitude or my deeds **infer and declare,**

“I thank God that I am not like that tax-collector sinner,

or I thank God that I am not like that Pharisee over there.