

The Opinion and Perspective of Jesus 2024
 Matthew 18:1-6 Luke 18:9-17

Matthew 18:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Luke 18:9-17 (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.”

I was sure that my very old print of George Washington was priceless,
 so I asked an art history expert to look at it and clean it up for me.
 It turned out the print was a very common one, and worth very little,
 but the frame was by Currier and Ives, and actually quite valuable.
To the untrained eye it's hard to determine true worth, often hidden.

When God chose young David, a shepherd to be Israel's future king,
 it was a total shock to David's family and to the prophet Samuel,
 however, as the Lord God explains in 1 Samuel 16:7,

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, ... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; **they look on the outward appearance**, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

The opinion and perspective of Jesus in both passages today
 reflect how God's gracious love re-appraises our hidden worth,
and clearly, God's perspective doesn't always coincide with ours.

In both passages Jesus crushes cultural expectations & assumptions,
 and must have shocked and stunned, and even offended his listeners.

In Luke 18, just to make sure there's no room for confusion,
 Jesus specifies the true point and message of the story, **vs. 9,**

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

Possibly, our familiarity with this passage may have smoothed

some of the shock and edge that his listeners would have heard, vs. 10,

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

The Pharisee represents the very peak and pinnacle of Jewish piety,
highly respected for doing the right and religious thing,
and rejecting with sharp disdain any of those who did not.

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 social distance and distinction between these two men, 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, so focused on his superiority over the tax collector,
used his prayer as a way to remind God, of how wonderful he was,
especially compared to the sin and depravity of that other guy.

"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 altogether superior and far more righteous & 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.**

More than a prayer addressed in humble gratitude 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 in his self-righteousness,
surely he's more than good enough to please the Lord.

In contrast to this self-righteous and self-satisfied Pharisee
the tax collector was the lowest of the lowest of any outcast,
and was rejected and shunned by all decent and godly people.

The listeners of this parable would easily recognize the extreme,
one, a godly man and the other a notorious sinner,
men at opposite ends of the moral and religious spectrum, 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!'

The position and prayer of the tax collector are critical clues,
for in contrast to the religious man honored in public worship,
the tax collector stands at the edge, in the back of the temple,
perhaps too ashamed of his life, too scandalous to actually go in.

Everyone knows he's an outcast, rightly rejected by all decent folks,
someone whom they should hold in righteous contempt and disdain,
someone who has no right even to ask God for anything, vs. 13.
... not even looking up ... but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

He's not making any excuses or pleading any good works,
and all he does is ask and beg for God's mercy and pardon.

In that culture where the Pharisee was an impressive religious hero,
the listeners would assume he was the one more pleasing to God.
But the story does not turn out as everyone expected, vs. 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.

**The parable turns expectations and appearances upside down,
redefining who is the wicked and who is the more righteous.**

The point can be hard for those of us regularly in the church to hear.

But it seems that this Pharisee has just enough religion
to appear externally virtuous and outwardly moral & good,
yet not enough to be humble and grateful to God.

Impressed with himself, he came to boast, not to worship the Lord,
and so this outwardly religious man left the temple that day
no different, untouched and unchanged from how he came in,
& being so full of himself didn't leave enough room for God's grace.

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.

The point and message are most uncomfortably clear,
that the ones considered less worthy, a bother and insignificant,
are in fact highly valued, priceless and loved, **by God's choice.**

We all, all of us are greatly valued, precious and treasured by God,
simply because God has said so, by the Lord's choice alone,
freely giving what we cannot hope to achieve for ourselves.

In Luke, this parable is connected to a practical application, vs. 15,
People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it,
they sternly ordered them not to do it.

At this point in his ministry,
Jesus was often overwhelmed by the crowds of people in need,
some to be healed, important leaders coming to ask questions,
and dealing with mere children, easily ignored or dismissed,

was way down on the importance scale for the disciples, vs. 16-17

But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

In Matthew, Jesus explains this with a harsh application, vs. 18:5-6,

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

So the task of both family and Church, is to demonstrate and model the truth and depth of our Christian faith by both word and deed, that is, by our example and by the choices we make in life, for faith grows mostly through observation and experience
for it is by how we live that we truly demonstrate and prove that our words of faith and integrity really have meaning.

I believe that the significant task of this church and congregation is to create a caring and **faith-nurturing environment** where we do faithfully reflect God's gracious love, and where children can grow and experience God's grace.

Our call is to live with intention and live to actively demonstrate God's love and grace, God's blessing and hope in every way we can by serving as **caring dispensers of God's love, joy and grace**, each of us as faithful reflections of God's own gracious love.

God has chosen you, God has chosen me, God chose each of our children, God chose each of us to be his own precious treasured possession, not because we are worthy or qualified, earn it or deserve it,

but simply because God set his heart on us – because God loves us, and any goodness about us or any good deeds we do, all derive from our submission to God's Spirit, as we allow God's good to flow through us,
i.e., as we respond to God's prior grace, blessing and choosing.

We humans choose the most obviously qualified – but God does not. We set limits and boundaries for inclusion – but Jesus does not.

In grace God chooses us, despite whatever chaos we make of our lives, freely giving what we can never hope to achieve for ourselves. God calls us to receive his grace and compassion, which has no connection or anything to do with our being qualified or worthy of God's favor.

If you have read through what Jesus did and said during his ministry, you can't miss seeing the pattern, again and again without fail, the acceptance and invitation to sinners, to the unworthy, as bold & powerful expressions of God's love, mercy and grace

especially toward the most undeserving and lost outcasts,
prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, thieves, Samaritans.

Again and again, Jesus demonstrated that truth about God's love,
that it's absolutely unearned and entirely gratuitous,
as if even the worst sin or failure could be forgiven ---

- **which in fact, is the very essence of our Christian faith,**
the Gospel, **because our God, our loving and merciful God,**
is the God of infinite and undeserved second chances.

But all too often, rather than demonstrating and talking about
our gracious God who loves us & blesses us, even just as we are,
religion has portrayed God as reluctant to forgive,
and demanding repentance before forgiveness & mercy,
which distorts the true message of God's love for us all,
the mission of Jesus, God's grace for undeserving sinners.

The Good News we are called by God to live, to reflect and make known,
and the wonderful truth that Christians are called to proclaim:
is that God loves us, loves us each and every one of us,
regardless of our sins or mistakes or failures,
regardless of our situation or trouble we are in.

When we are aware and accept grace as God's promise and truth for us,
that truth of God's unrelenting love and desire to bless us,
that same grace has the power to grow and transform us,
into living better, more joyful and meaningful lives.

And whether we respond to God's love with faithful obedience or not
yet God still loves us, regardless of whatever we may say or do.

In love, God continues to say, 'yes', even as we are screaming, 'no'.
And that wonderful and undeserved loving grace
is rooted in the very nature and being of our God,
which means that no amount of trying will make God love us more,
and no amount of sin or failure will make God love us any less.

Our call and challenge, as those whose life has been touched by Jesus
is that now, we must be the affirming & encouraging people of God,
a people of grace, capable of faithfully reflecting God's grace.

All around us, in this community of Las Cruces and our world,
people cry out in hopelessness, loneliness, fear and need.
Current events reveal the depravity & desperation surrounding us.

As Jesus has reached out to us with his love, mercy and acceptance,
and the question is, will we respond and will we do the same?,
and will be let that same grace and love flow through us?

In the parable Jesus told, in **self-righteous shameless arrogance**

the Pharisee looked down and despised those unsavory others,
& the disciples with a distorted sense of importance & priority
tried to block parents seeking blessings for their children.

In arrogance and pride, we too may suppose God is quite impressed
by how wonderfully splendid and worthily faithful we are,
or how fortunate God is that we are such marvelous servants,
who work so hard compared to those less worthy others.

We must end any sense of superiority & 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.

Hear again and heed these words of warning from Jesus:

...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. Truly I
tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes
one such child in my name welcomes me.