

A STORY THAT WILL MAKE YOU PROUD

Scripture Reading: Luke 18:10-14, RSV

To some who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray—one a tax collector and the other a Pharisee. The tax collector stood up and prayed about himself: “God I thank you that I am not like other men—hypocritical church leaders and sanctimonious ministers like this Pharisee. I confess the depths of my sins twice a day, I admit that I have not paid a faithful tithe regularly. I see my sin and am grateful to you for showing it to me. I am not blind like some other Christians I know.” But the Pharisee stood at a distance. He could not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, “God be merciful to me a proud, arrogant, hypocritical sinner.”

Many of those who heard Jesus tell this story identified with the publican and some identified with the Pharisee. They were grateful that they were not traitors like the publican. Many admired the Pharisees. Even then it couldn't be denied that many of them were sincere, honest people who loved and preserved the law for Judaism. In some respects the Pharisee in this story is not truly typical of all Pharisees. Because of this parable and other statements Jesus made about Pharisees, we tend not to identify with the Pharisee when we read this parable as many of the hearers did.

On the other hand we identify with the publican. We are grateful we are not like the Pharisees. We have come to believe that Jesus meant what he said when he told us that only those who confessed their sins and humbled themselves can experience justification. Like the tax collector in my own version of the parable that I stated above, we tend to look down on those who get caught up in legalism and perfectionism. We feel superior to those who wrestle with unnecessary guilt. We ask ourselves: “Can't they see that Jesus condemns all that in this parable?”

If you think that way, you've missed the point of the parable. Jesus is not merely trying to teach us something in this parable. In fact many of Christ's parables were not designed simply to teach a truth, but there is something far more profound happening when you read the parables. The center of the parable is not what we learn from it, but how we react to it. The parable is supposed to evoke a certain kind of reaction from us. We thrust ourselves into the center of the story. We naturally identify with one person or the other and in doing that certain dimensions of our experience open up to us that we have never before seen.

In other words this parable reveals not that we ought to avoid being self-righteous but that we are inevitably, inexorably and always in fact wrestling with self-righteousness. It is a problem for everybody—not only Pharisees but even publicans. When we recognize that by identifying with the publican we have committed the same sin that the Pharisee did, then the parable has performed its function. We are standing in the middle of it revealed in our self-righteous glory, thanking God that unlike the Pharisee we know what God wants and we do what he tells us to do: We repent and we admit that we are weak. It's as if the parable is a time bomb that explodes inside of us and opens up the truth that we have never before seen. Our own self-righteousness is laid bare and now we can see ourselves for what we really are. (Paul Achtemeier, *The Ministry of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels*,” Interpretation, 1981, pp. 161-162.) There is a pride of the Pharisee but there is also a pride of the publican. The pride of the publican makes us see that our most pious, repentant self-abasing, humiliating thoughts can be used by the devil to create pride and self-righteousness in us. Everything

A STORY THAT WILL MAKE YOU PROUD

we do can be corrupted. We must never forget that.

Let's take a brief look at how the Pharisee functioned in this parable and compare it with the function of the publican if he were to be flipped over. In a sense a Pharisee can easily become a publican. Once he learns that he has been legalistic and hypocritical, he can shift to the other extreme and become a publican. The Pharisee possesses a strong sense of conscience and morality. He lives by what he ought to do and what he ought not to do. His whole life is dominated by how much time he spends praying, how he eats, how often he witnesses, how much he contributes to his church.

On the other hand because he has such a sense of conscience, the Pharisee is also very much aware of his failure when he does not live up to the oughts. Every mistake causes him to wince with pain. Most of the time he feels that God is really not pleased with his performance. What he hears from God is simply the refrain, "You can do better. You can do better." Like Avis he tries a little harder. It begins to catch up with him. Even the most preoccupied Pharisee begins to feel the load of the law—this yoke of bondage Paul talks about in Galatians 5, this sense of frustration, anxiety and guilt. People who feel this way very often don't get release from their guilt unless they've been in some emotional meeting and walked down to the altar, had a revival and had this thing lifted from their backs. Then they slip back into the same pattern of Christian life and they've got to have some other kind of experience to relieve the pressure. Such people are always thinking about the externals, the regulations. They desperately need to be accepted by other people. They need the approval of other church members. That seems to be their only security. They can't be vulnerable with one another. They can't admit they have human weaknesses to anyone else, only to God and they do that only most reluctantly.

Recently I was talking to a good friend who told me that he has to admit he recognizes, even though he tries to do his work in the church for the most altruistic, self-denying motives, that part of his compulsion to work as hard as he does and to preach as much as he does is that he has a feeling of inadequacy, incompleteness and insecurity. He was being very honest with me when he said that and that vulnerability, that openness, that willingness to recognize that even the best things he does have a potential for being corrupted by his own pride and his own weaknesses were a remarkable display of vulnerability. Most preachers, theologians and church leaders are unable to do that.

At our staff retreat in February one of the questions that we asked each other was: "Who pastors you? To whom do you go when you're hurting? Where do you turn when you feel you've got to talk about a problem with somebody? When you're feeling insecure, when you're ridden with guilt, where do you pastors go?" We are talking about going to another human, besides going to Jesus Christ in prayer. There are many pastors who will tell you they have no one to whom they can go. Where do we let our spiritual hair down and be honest?

The Pharisee could never do that. When he looked at the publican, he didn't see somebody to whom he could relate and to whom he could tell his problems. He saw somebody spiritually inferior. Some people think that if they are vulnerable they lose the power and authority they have. Just the opposite is true. Vulnerable members and vulnerable leaders hold whatever power they have loosely. They make it clear that they listen to counsel, that they're not ruling with an iron hand, that they can tolerate a point of view that disagrees with their own.

Let's take a look at the publican. How can the Pharisee become a publican? If he recognizes that he

shouldn't be burdened any longer by "I ought not to do this and I ought not to do that." He learns that he should feel free and he begins to do that. The only ought that governs his life is that he ought not to feel any oughts. Duty is a drag, he says to himself. Obeying the law because it is required of me, that's not going to be helpful. God wants me to feel love, to do things out of a loving spirit. Now he doesn't worry about the time he spends or does not spend in prayer or how much he gives to the church. None of those things is a concern any more. He is particularly grateful now that he isn't stuck in the law and in the legalistic trap that the Pharisee is stuck in. He doesn't have a low self-esteem. His self-esteem is so high he is going right through the ceiling. He doesn't feel inferior. If anything he hears God's voice constantly reminding him that everything he does is just fine. Instead of being like Avis and trying harder, he is like Hertz, he has already arrived. If he does feel bad it makes him feel good because feeling bad is proof that he's humble. He feels good because he feels bad. He is quick to admit that he's weak. He's quick to admit he's a sinner. In fact he doesn't mind even parading it about in front of people.

This isn't a person with an oversensitive conscience. This is a publican with a publican's pride. God's kindness has become a very soft cushion, like a beanbag into which he settles his life very comfortably. While the Pharisee was preoccupied with discipline in his life, this person doesn't even think about it. God's grace has become an ointment that heals and comforts his every scratch. There are people like this. They are very critical of the self-righteous and they love to talk about their own sins. They like to feel condemned. They don't mind feeling guilty because they know that guilt is necessary for forgiveness and cleansing. People have the impression that if they talk about their sin and they are open with it, God will condemn them less for having such sins. Humility then becomes a spiritual achievement. This is the publican's pride that is epidemic among the pious.

There is a piety of the Pharisee which focuses on the law and there is the piety of the publican which focuses on grace. I want to stress that no matter what kind of piety you have, it is fodder for the pride that Jesus condemns. All our talk about justification and sanctification and forgiveness can be used by the devil to fuel the fires of pride in our breasts. One writer says, "So we must be especially careful of the devout moments in our life. No confession of sin safeguards us against pride. Even humility is not a virtue which is immune to the devil." (Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, p. 129.)

It doesn't hurt for young people to remember that, because teenagers are fond of pointing out the phonies in the church, the hypocrites. It is true that they can smell arrogance and pride a mile away. What you have to be careful of is that you are not proud of the fact that you can smell pride. Pride is a terrible sin because it's always there lurking in the shadows. We never see it until it has jumped on us and overpowered us. We have to be careful that we don't get a lot of enjoyment out of showing people that their halos are not gold but cheap tin.

It is true that we make distinctions and that we evaluate people in the normal course of affairs. In the house of God, however, it is out of place. When we sit at the Lord's table and eat together of the bread and the wine, we have to recognize that human distinctions—intelligence, wealth, social rank—mean nothing to God. When we sit next to the worst sinner in the church, many of us tend to ask, "Why in the world did that person even bother to come?" Instead of thanking God that here is perhaps an evidence that repentance is stirring within that person, thanking God that perhaps the angels are singing now over this one sinner who has come, we tend to make distinctions and be judgmental.

A STORY THAT WILL MAKE YOU PROUD

Helmut Thielicke tells about visiting in a home in his parish one time. As he walked in the door, there was a young man playing chorales on the piano. He knew that this young man was the prodigal son of the family. His life had been so shameful that it was common knowledge that the mother was brokenhearted about her son. As Thielicke walked in, the daughter of the family whispered to her brother, "Why don't you stop playing the piano, you hypocrite!" What she said was a terrible thing. She was as bad as the Pharisee, or as the publican might have been.

How did God look at this young man?

Did God see in him a man whose hours of yearning and of disgust with shame drove him into the temple and who down in his heart was praying the prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner?" or was the chorale only a piece of sentimental religiosity he used to cover up his black soul? Who...could ever tell? But to God it was plain.

What do we... really know of each other? What do we know about how you and I will look at the last judgment? What did the Pharisee know about the publican? We live between the false judgments we make now and the surprises which the Last Judgment will bring. (Ibid , p. 135.)

Each one of us has a secret with God, the ultimate secret whether he is the Lord of our lives. To some extent our behavior gives some evidence of it but ultimately it is a secret that God alone knows. We cannot know anyone else's standing before God. We are to look to him for grace and to each other with grace. That is what the parable of the Pharisee and the publican is trying to teach us. Only God can see us as we ought to be seen. To the extent that we remember, believe and accept it, the kind of humility that Jesus promised to us and wants for us will characterize our daily walk with him.