

With Humble Hearts

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Luke 18:9-14



Are you right with God? I want to hold that question before us all this morning. Surely it is the most important question we can ask, and the parable we hear today, if we have ears to hear, gives us the beginning of an answer.

I'm not proud of it, but I did say it. Kim and I were walking down the aisle of a big box store when we saw a child screaming in the aisle. He was about four years old, red-faced, angry about something he wanted that his mother had obviously said he could not have. She started out calmly. "Now, Joey, we talked about this. Remember our agreement." Like he was fourteen instead of four. That didn't really work, so she shifted tactics. "Joey, if you don't stop screaming we're going to leave the store and you'll get a time out." He only screamed louder. Then, it was like a switch went off, and she commenced to screaming at him. It was quite a scene, both of them staring each other down, veins popping out on their foreheads. Then, she jerked him up by the arm rather violently and stomped down the aisle, I assume to exit the store, leaving a buggy of things behind, their screams and cries trailing behind.

I'm not proud, but I said it. "Thank God we're not *those* kinds of parents."

You might as well paint a target on your back after making a declaration like that, and sure enough, on a trip not long after that to the grocery store with our three-year-old daughter in tow, she asked, innocently enough if she could have a VHS video. We said no, and she proceeded to start crying. But we held firm, using all our superior parenting techniques for just this kind of situation. We got out of the store and were putting things in the trunk, when we discovered the video. Chandler had, somehow, while sitting in the front of the buggy, managed to – there's no other word for it – shoplift the VHS tape. Little Joey might have been a handful, but he was no criminal.

It is a slippery slope to stand off to the side, watching someone else's struggle, and say, "Thank you God that I am not like that."

Theologian John Lennon sang “Instant karma’s gonna get you/Gonna knock you right on the head...” It felt a little like karma, that moment, like what goes around comes around. But be careful. This is not a parable about karma, but grace, and they are very different.

This parable is a lesson in prayer. That’s how Luke frames it. Jesus is speaking to people who trust not in God, but in their own righteousness, who believe that they can under their own power earn God’s favor. When you are standing before God, the words of Brene Brown hold true – comparison kills joy. It kills joy because for all the people you find who are supposedly worse than you, you can find twice as many, under the same logic who are better. Your joy is swallowed up in striving, in competing, and in regrets.

Growing up in Alabama, we were always 49th on the state comparison charts – health, education, desirable place to live, etc. And we always had the same response – thank God for Mississippi. We salved our own inferiority complex by turning on others who had it, or so we thought, just a little worse than us.

Look at the Pharisee. Far from a villain, he is the “faithful, dependable, tithing type who pays the salaries of ministers so they can preach on the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.” The fact is that we need more of this type of religious behavior, more people who take discipleship seriously, more people who are generous even to the point of giving a tenth of their income or more to the work of ministry. Let’s be careful here; the main problem with the Pharisee is not his behavior. His behavior is commendable and desirable. The problem is his posture towards God, his belief that his behavior justifies him rather than the grace of God. He feels he is entitled to God’s grace, more so than the tax collector, because he has done all the right things.

The pronouns give it away. The prayer is more a talking with himself. *I* do this and *I* do that, and *I* am not like thus and so.

The tax collector, on the other hand, works for a foreign government, collecting taxes from his own people, politically a traitor, a reprehensible character, and the enemy. But the difference in him and the Pharisee is that he recognizes his state before God and his need for grace. He stands far off and proclaims the truth about himself in the sight of God. He goes home justified rather than the Pharisee. How can this be? Apparently, when placed alongside God, there is none righteous, no not one. And the only ones among us who are truly free are those who have given up the illusion of self-made righteousness and embraced the reality of grace.

Will Willimon at one time was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He had to, as he described it, do a stint as an advisor to one of the more notorious fraternities on campus.

“Two sophomores come to Chapel to worship, hoping to be justified, that is, to be brought closer to God, set right with God. Now I want you to watch, not the actions of these two people, but the actions of God.” At a long Palm Sunday afternoon meeting with the fraternity, he found himself wondering, “What’s a person like *me* doing among people like *these* on a Sunday like this? I’m a preacher, not a probation officer.” He tries to leave the meeting, making his way past an unshaven, beefy guy propping up a wall who mutters, “That was a killer sermon today.”

“You, *you* go to church?”

“Sure, I’m there most every Sunday. Sit on the back row. George (he gestures toward this other guy in an inappropriate t-shirt next to him) goes with me. George said he liked your sermon a couple of weeks ago better than today. But I needed the one you did today. It was like God really spoke to me.”

Two men went to the chapel to pray. One a Methodist preacher. The other an unshaven sophomore in a t-shirt. The latter was justified, made right by God, but not the former. If you’ve got ears to hear, hear.”¹

Comparison kills joy. And lining ourselves up before God in some kind of order of righteousness kills prayer, authentic prayer, which is nothing more than a placing of ourselves before this God in whose light we all of us fall short, and in whose light we all of us are deeply loved as we are. To embrace this grace is to be made right with God.

So here’s the question again. Are you right with God? And the answer, it seems to me is, on our own, no, we are not right with God. But here, gathered in this community of sinners, accepting one another as fellow disciples on the way, supporting one another when we fall short, encouraging one another when we are dismayed, weeping with those who weep, laughing with those who laugh, and, week after week, placing ourselves humbly and with deep gratitude before the God who loves us – we come to discover that what we cannot ever do for ourselves God has done for us in Christ. And that discovery sends us out into the world, sends us back into our homes and relationships, right with God. May it be so. Amen.

¹ Quote from William Willimon, “Amazing Grace.” Duke Chapel Sermons, 1998, page 8.