MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Faith in an Age of Virtue Signaling"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On October 30th, 2022, from Luke 18:9-14

One morning a Sunday school teacher at the local Baptist church taught a wonderful lesson on this parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector from the gospel of Luke, and ended by leading his class in a prayer, "Dear God, we thank you that we have your word and your church, and therefore we are not like the awful Pharisee in this story." Now, it's obvious the Sunday school teacher missed the point of this parable. But before we get too comfortable with ourselves, the fact that we can point out the teacher's failure, and possibly even laugh at his incomprehension, means we are all secretly saying to ourselves, "God, I thank you that I am not like that teacher, who did not understand the point of that parable," which means now we've also missed the point and revealed we are just like the Pharisee in the story and the teacher we're laughing at. This parable is not just an enigma—it is a trap! As soon we think we've grasped its meaning, we become its object lesson; proving how hard it is to avoid living in self-righteous pride like the Pharisee.

We all want to be good people. In fact, most of us imagine we are good people. And this is where our conundrum begins, because Jesus and the gospels are opposed to "goodness" and "good people." In the gospels, goodness is not understood as synonymous with virtue, as it is today. Goodness is a problem. I know it sounds crazy, but again and again Jesus and the gospels come out against goodness. When the Rich Young Ruler approached Jesus and addressed him as "Good Teacher," Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Wait? Is there really no one who is good but God? Not even Jesus? What hope is there for us? And if this were not alarming enough, Jesus also said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous (or the good), but sinners to repentance." Jesus didn't even want to be around good people. He spent all his time partying with the "wrong people" the "bad people" who society condemned and refused to hang around the "good people" of his day (the Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes).

Goodness in the gospels is not a virtue but a problem. According to Jesus, goodness can be perilous for our souls. The more "good" we think we are, the further away we may find ourselves from God, and this is an extremely difficult teaching for those of us who have based our entire lives on trying to be good people. Like the parable itself, goodness turns out to be a trap. Whenever we think we are good we've probably already lost our way. This is the reason Luther raged against people who tried to justify themselves with "good works," and why we use the term "do gooders" to describe people who are trying too hard, and why we have the familiar aphorism, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Lord knows it is! Our desire for goodness can be dangerous. As Jesus found in the wilderness, the enemy will try use our desire for goodness to turn us toward evil. "Don't you want to feed all the hungry people of the world Jesus…just turn these stones into bread?" Evil often appears in the form of goodness, which is why it is incredibly hard to resist. So, most of us succumb to thinking all that matters are our intentions, which is untrue. Intentions are very important, but the impact of our actions matters the most. If our intentions are pure and our impact is harmful, our actions are still not good.

A few years ago, the British comedy show Mitchell & Webb had a hilarious sketch where Jesus is telling his disciples the parable of the "Good Samaritan" and says, "Now think about your attitudes, because it was a Samaritan who helped. Listen, I'm saying it was a 'good' Samaritan, if you can imagine such a thing." Suddenly one of the disciples' interrupts Jesus and says, "Yes, I can! I think we all can! I know there's a lot of prejudice against Samaritans which is terrible, but I think I speak for everyone when I say there are loads of really nice Samaritans." Another disciple says, "Yeah, some of my best friends are Samaritans." Another says, "Me and the wife went on holiday to Samaria last year and they were lovely. Couldn't do enough for you." Then the disciple says, "So what I'm finding offensive Jesus, is your unreflecting acceptance of the cliché that all Samaritans are bad." "No, no" Jesus responds. "I'm saying he was good." And the disciple says, "Yeah, but you're implying that the fact that he was good is worth a story in itself, like it's some kind weird curiosity to have 'good' Samaritan." Jesus says, "No, I'm saying goodness comes in unexpected places." To which the disciple replies, "Yeah, and I'm saying that the fact you wouldn't expect goodness from a Samaritan betrays your inherent racism." You'll have to go watch the whole sketch because it only gets better from there.

The truly ironic thing about the sketch is that when Jesus told this parable, he never called the Samaritan "good." The words "good Samaritan" don't appear in the Bible. This title and subject heading were added by interpreters of the Bible hundreds of years later, betraying their own inherent bias. Giving a parable a title is a precarious activity. It usually messes up the story and makes it harder to interpret.

So, here's a friendly public service reminder to ignore the titles in your Bibles. There are no titles in the original version and none of the titles people came up with later are very helpful. Jesus would never have called a Samaritan good, not because he was biased toward Samaritans, but because he was biased against goodness. He never called anyone good because he believed no one was good but God alone, not even himself.

The Pharisee in this story prayed, "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." There's nothing wrong with fasting twice a week and there's certainly nothing wrong with giving a tenth of your income. I wish more people would do that! The church would never have to worry about money again! It's laudable that the Pharisee was not a thief, rogue, adulterer, or tax-collector. These are all either problematic or exploitative occupations. The point of this parable is not that we should become thieves, rouges, adulterers, or tax-collectors, or that fasting, or tithing are bad. The point of this parable is we should not be so arrogant and self-righteous as to imagine we are good or seek to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others or even by our behavior.

As human beings, we are notoriously self-deluded, and regularly overestimate our importance. Immediately before this parable, Luke tells us Jesus told this story to people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." These are the two sides of the same dangerous human temptation: Pride. Arrogance. Conceit. Egoism. Vainglory.

I once heard someone say that there's a difference between confidence, cockiness, and arrogance. Confidence says, "I know I can tie my own shoes. So, I don't make a big deal about it. I just tie my shoes without fanfare whenever they need tying." Cockiness says, "I make a point of tying my shoes a lot, especially in front of others. Every chance I get, I make sure to mention how I can tie my own shoes." Arrogance says, "I refuse to associate with anyone who can't tie their own shoes. In fact, the first thing I find out about anyone I meet is if they can tie their own shoes, because it would just be impossible for me to even speak to anyone who can't do that."

These are helpful distinctions; the only difficulty is that none of these words accurately describe the Pharisee in this story. He wasn't just overconfident, self-assured, arrogant, or prideful. The best word to describe him is entitled. Pride is having an inflated sense of ourselves, but entitlement is believing we have a right to certain things *because* of our inflated sense of self. The Pharisee thought that because he was not like other people; because he fasted and tithed, he had a right to God's favor, a right to justification, a right to be forgiven, a right to be saved, a right that was extremely important to him because he also imagined it was a right the tax collector did not have, and those are our favorite kind of rights, aren't they?

In the beginning of the gospel of Luke, Jesus' mentor, John the Baptist, had the same problem with entitled Pharisees who trusted in themselves and had contempt for others. John invited everyone to repent of their sins and be baptized, but some Pharisees and religious leaders were saying, "We don't need to repent. We are already good people. We are religious leaders. We are pillars of our community. We have Abraham as our ancestor." To which John replied, "Do not say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor' for God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Basically, John was saying, the status you imagine that you have as children of Abraham does not automatically make you good or entitle you to certain rights and privileges.

God can make new children of Abraham out of thin air, but what God really wants is not people who feel entitled by their piety, religious status, or social standing, but people who understand they are flawed and finite human beings in need of repentance—people who know they're not perfect, people who know they're a work in progress, people who know they should be humble, people who know they need God, people who know they need mercy, people who know they need to change! [Is there anybody in this church today who knows they need mercy, who knows they need God, who knows they need to change?]

Every one of us guilty of thinking that because we are not thieves, rogues, adulterers, or tax-collectors, because we fast and tithe, that we are entitled to things—we imagine that because of our status as "good people" we are entitled to honor and deference. We imagine that because of our "goodness" we are entitled to receive the benefit of the doubt in all situations. We imagine that because we are "good" we are entitled to get what we want, when we want it, and how want it. We imagine that because we are "good" we are entitled to say "Jump" and people should ask "How high?" on the way up.

Just like the first century world of John the Baptist and Jesus, our society is beset by the same kind of entitlement today. We imagine that because of who we are, what we've done (our presumed goodness), we have the right to get what we want and dictate reality for other people. That's not just pride and arrogance, it's entitlement! When we compare ourselves to others, judge others, defame others, attempt to critique another's character, or damage someone's reputation, we can be sure we are standing in a place of entitlement.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Notice it doesn't say "might be humbled," it says, "we will be!" That should be a warning to us all! God isn't looking for more entitled people claiming to be "children of Abraham" asserting their "goodness," securing their rights, or imagining their goodness will save them. God needs more people on their knees, with their heads bowed, beating their chests, and praying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." God is not looking for more good people. God is looking for humble people—people who know they're not perfect, who know they're a work in progress, who know they should be humble, who know they need God, who know they need mercy, who know they need to change. Jesus did not come for the righteous but the sinners, for those who know they need transformation, salvation, and liberation. It's almost as if Jesus was saying God has a hard time working with people who already think they're good.

We love to quote from, Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." And some of us focus on doing justice, others on loving mercy, but the one we all have the hardest time with is walking humbly. Believe it or not, doing justice and loving mercy are the easy part. Walking humbly with God—that's the difficult part that we struggle with the most, the part that people like us can barely grasp, and yet it is also the most important.

There have been multiple times where pride has had its way with me and caused me to lose my way. I felt first called to ministry at the age of 18 and went to military college in Southern Alabama to become chaplain, but on the first day the older cadets lined all of us up on the stairs of the chapel and asked us what branch of service we wanted to be. One cadet said "Armor," another "Artillery," another, "Intelligence." When they came to me, I said, "Chaplaincy" and the older cadets just laughed and laughed. I was humiliated. My pride took over and I graduated as an infantry officer, quite a shift from chaplaincy. I lost myself and my calling. The same thing happened when I went to Divinity School to become a pastor. All the students and faculty said, "Who would want to be a pastor? That's the lowliest occupation on earth. Only someone who can't get into a doctoral program and be a scholar would be a pastor?" My pride kicked in again and by the time I left seminary I was headed for a Ph.D. program to become a professor.

I kept running away from my calling, because of pride. I was almost finished with my degree when suddenly I was asked to serve as the interim pastor of a church. I asked God, "Why do keep doing this to me? Why do you keep pushing me to be a pastor?" And eventually the answer came, "To keep you humble." It was not the answer I was looking for, and I'm not sure it's been working, but I do know I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, I'm being true to myself, and unlike a military officer or professor, being a pastor is a humbling occupation. It is an "up-at-dawn, pride swallowing siege."

Every single day I see the best and worst of humanity, walk with people experiencing the deepest grief and the greatest joy, try to speak about mysteries far beyond my comprehension, strive to galvanize a radically diverse community to work together toward a common mission, and encounter challenges that cannot be solved on my own or faced without humility.

Humility is not just the opposite of pride; it is the antidote to entitlement. Entitlement says "You owe me. I deserve this!" Humility says, "Thank you. I'm so lucky!" In Philippians 2, Paul provided one of the clearest paths toward Christlike humility. He said, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." As the Pharisee demonstrated in his prayer, humility begins not just with how we see ourselves, but how we see others. Humility is not having zero confidence or a low self-esteem. Humility isn't being self-deprecating or thinking negatively about ourselves. Humility is the ability to tell the truth about ourselves, no more and no less. The root word of humility is "humus," "dirt" or "earth." It's what human beings are made of. To be humble is to be rooted and grounded in our humanity, in the truth of ourselves. To be humble is to be human—no more and no less.

The reality is, we cannot justify ourselves with goodness. We cannot save ourselves with entitlement. Nothing can save us but the honest and humble belief—dare I call it faith—that we are in dire need of saving. Only people who know they need to repent can do it. Only people who know they need help can receive it. Only people who know they need saving can be saved. There is grace in this! We don't have to save ourselves. We don't have to justify ourselves. We don't even have to be good. All we have to do is be humble. All we have to do is be human. All we have to do is to let go of our striving to be "good," our assertions of righteousness, our entitlement. All we have to do is know we're not perfect, know we're a work in progress, know we need help, know we need to change. All we have to do is simply bow our heads, beat our chests, and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"