



A Pharisee to the Pharisee

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

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Luke 18:9-14

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.”

Last weekend a painful scene played out in Sun Valley, California – though by all appearances those in the room were all smiles. A well-known evangelical pastor in his eighties was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his church and as a part of the celebration, he was interviewed along with a panel of other men. As a part of the panel discussion each panelist was given a one- or two-word phrase and asked to give their gut reaction, presumably in one or two words as well. This well-known pastor was given the name “Beth Moore” as the short phrase he was to respond to, and his reply was just as brief: “Go home.” On the recording of the session you can hear that his answer was followed by laughter and applause in the room. Not surprisingly, this exchange ignited a firestorm on social media.

Even if you don’t know much about Beth Moore you can probably deduce that this was a disrespectful answer. Beth Moore is a household name among Southern Baptists, the denomination where she finds her home, and I’ve heard her speak – the woman is a preacher.

She has been preaching and teaching the Bible – to women – for decades. Last spring, she had the audacity to preach in a room with men in it, and she has been facing the ire of evangelicals, like the one celebrating his church’s anniversary, ever since. As the laughter died down and the panel discussion continued, that same well-known preacher went on to criticize the Southern Baptists for moving (at what I see as a snail’s pace) toward a softer view on women in the pulpit, condemning them for giving up what he called “biblical authority” to “empower people who want power.” In other words, *Tell that power-hungry woman to go home...where she belongs*. Now, I could say more about how it’s ultimately unfair to deem as power-hungry someone whose biological characteristics have put them into a disempowered position from birth – because rather than seeking power they’re probably just trying to live fully into their God-given humanity. And I could say more about how someone who has always *had* that power really isn’t in a position to judge someone who *hasn’t*. But I wouldn’t want to rant. So I won’t.

Meanwhile, Jesus’ voice rings out from those authoritative pages of scripture, calling out, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” This parable Jesus tells about the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector invites us to reconsider how we judge one another’s motives.

If you’ve ever seen a production of *Godspell*, perhaps you also have a very dramatic scene in your mind whenever you hear this parable. I first saw the show as a child when my older brother participated in his high school’s production; and I can remember how melodramatic the actors were – clownish, even (which is the feel of that show). At the parable’s end the actor playing Jesus came over and literally pulled up the one being exalted off the ground, while he rested his other hand on the head of the one being humbled and slowly squished him down until it was as if he had disappeared into the ground. The whole parable feels melodramatic, that’s part of how it lures us in. It’s difficult to imagine anyone actually singing their own praises in public through a disguise as thinly veiled as the Pharisee’s prayer. He’s cartoonish – but the exaggeration is how Jesus gets us.

The two men had gone up to the temple to pray; one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. Now, no matter who you were or where you were coming from, you went “up” when you went to the temple to pray, because the city of Jerusalem sat on a hill. The temple was the religious center of the nation, sitting atop the metaphorical apex of Israel. But we’re led to imagine that on that metaphorical level, the tax collector perhaps had a longer climb.

The Pharisees were a pious group, set apart in order to pursue holiness. They acted differently, dressed differently, they did religion differently; it’s not hard to see how they ended up susceptible to the kind of temptation the Pharisee in the story gives in to. Jesus describes him standing at the temple in prayer, and according to the custom he would have stood with his eyes raised toward heaven, arms lifted up as he prayed right alongside many others who were offering their prayers out loud. But I imagine he prayed a little louder than the rest, as it seems that his words are not intended for God quite as much as they are for his neighbors.

[dripping with irony] “God, thank you so much for not making me like other people. There are so many people, O God, who just need you. Thieves, evil people, adulterers, even people like [thumb gesture] *him*. I’m just so grateful you’ve set me apart from all them to live this blessed life. I’m so grateful that I do whatever I can to show you, [louder] giving much more than I’m technically required to give in the offering plate; and I fast not once but twice a week! I’m just so, so grateful. Amen.”

At the other end of the pew, close to the aisle and as out of the way as he could get, was the tax collector, a man who was also set apart though not so much by choice; rather, he was set apart in the sense that folks just didn’t really want to associate with him. He was painfully aware of this reality in particular at the temple, when his Jewish brothers like the Pharisee did everything in their power to steer clear of him.

The prayer he offered was of a different nature altogether. Not even willing to assume the traditional posture to metaphorically look God in the eye, instead he was doubled over, beating

his breast in shame and repentance. His prayer was concise, contrite, and offered with a depth of emotion the Pharisee never would have deemed appropriate for the temple. He prayed, simply, “God, have mercy on me. I am a sinner.”

Jesus wraps up his parable with this one sentence: 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. And this is where a Sunday School reading of the parable often stops. When we encounter these words, we hear what we expect to hear – probably wrapped in with a few of Jesus’ other teachings, like the one about not praying in public but finding a closet in which to practice our piety or not letting our right hand know what our left hand is doing when we practice generosity. That teaching is straightforward, and it’s worthwhile: When it comes to religion, if you do the thing for show, it isn’t worth doing at all.

But I wonder if the real teaching of this parable is actually less about the content of it and more about the experience of hearing it? If we hear it in harmony with yet another of Jesus’ teachings – about taking the log out of your own eye before you try to fix the speck in your brother’s – how might that change our hearing of it? Maybe a better way to ask that is: When you put yourself in the story, which character are you?

In a book called *Reading the Bible from the Margins* biblical scholar Miguel de la Torre describes the very typical Christian practice of reading a story from scripture as if we were in the position of the protagonist. He gives the example of the parable of the Good Samaritan. If you’re anything like me, when you’ve heard that story before you’ve most likely identified with the Samaritan – either because you have behaved like him, in which case good for you, or because you strive to be like him, to care for those in need regardless of your differences. But de la Torre’s point is that that’s not the only way to read that parable. It’s more of a stretch to imagine that perhaps we are the man who’s been beaten by the road, or that we are one of the many who passed him by. Most difficult of all is to imagine that we might in fact be the bandits who left him there – whether we ourselves, or the systems of which we are a part.

So returning to Pharisee and the tax collector, offering their prayers at the temple: when you imagine the story in your mind, notice through whose eyes you're watching things unfold.

Are you the tax collector?

The experience of encountering this teaching honestly is really a bit of a paradox, because when we assume our position as the tax collector – which is what it seems like the parable is calling us to do – it invariably causes us to look on the Pharisee with the eyes of judgment. This is not because the tax collector does that – if we were *truly* like him we would be solely focused on our own sin and our own need for repentance and mercy – but it's so difficult for us as humans *not* to slip from observation into judgment. And the second we look on the Pharisee with judgment, haven't we become him, instead? Isn't that exactly the sin for which we are judging him? The parable certainly loses some of its punch if the tax collector then looks over at the Pharisee, rolls his eyes, and tacks on "Oh, and God – thank you that I'm not as hypocritical and self-assured as that Pharisee."

In my sermon on Covenant Sunday in September, the day we celebrated the story of this particular community of faith, I talked about a facet of our identity that, in the light of this parable, seems to put us in a very similar predicament as the Pharisees. As I've said, the Pharisees were a pious group, set apart in order to pursue holiness – in other words, a group set apart from the surrounding faith community because they believed and behaved in a way that made them look different. As Northminster Church, our reasons are different, but our "set-apartness" is something we have in common.

In that sermon I named my fear for our community, which is that I believe because of our circumstances, we are particularly susceptible to the sin of pride. It's a short step from "Thank God that I've found this community" to "thank God that we aren't like all of them." Or, in a paraphrase of the Pharisee, "God, we thank you that we are not like other churches."

And it's important to be aware of this temptation. But when "other churches" are doing things like hosting panels where they deride women who follow their God-given calls into the ministry as power-hungry man-haters who ought to pack up and go home, it can be difficult, to say the least, to keep ourselves from praying the Pharisee's prayer.

So how do we guard against it?

In setting up the parable Luke made sure to tell us that Jesus offered it to a specific group of people. Often the best thing we can do in reading a parable is to stop and pay attention to who's listening. Luke began the scene like this: "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt."

Contempt is the key. If we can guard against contempt, I think we can avoid the trap of the Pharisee – or the trap of being a Pharisee toward the Pharisee. And we guard against contempt by remembering love; by remembering that there is no them – that we are all an us; by remembering that we are – all of us – one. We remind ourselves here week after week that we are each created in the image of God, and that I can see the image of God a little more clearly because each of you are in my life. I commit to believing that is true not just of everyone in this room, but of everyone, including each person I have mentioned in this sermon – of the Pharisee and the tax collector, of Beth Moore and of every man in that room in California who laughed at her. We are all made in the image of God, we are all a part of one family, one humanity.

And remembering that we are one does not mean that we don't hold one another to account for the ways that we hurt each other, for the sins we've committed against our neighbors. To hold each other accountable *is* to love one another. But it's only when we're grounded in love and not in fear that we can challenge one another without contempt. Fear is the breeding grounds for contempt, and there is much that we could allow ourselves to fear. We could fear that injustice will ultimately win the day, even and especially in our churches; we could fear

that the church will continue to be known for who it hates rather than who it loves; we could fear that our children will grow up wanting nothing to do with the church because of what we have allowed it to become. But fear is the breeding grounds for contempt. And we cannot find our grounding in fear.

So Northminster, let us commit again and again to love. Let us love our way toward a more just world, even and especially in the church. Let us love our way toward a church with open doors – even our doors could always stand to be propped open a little wider. Let us love our way toward a church that bears the fruit of the Spirit of God, remembering that we are not in a story of “us versus them,” not even when “they” try to frame it that way. When we’re grounded in love it is never us or them; it is always us *for* them. And that changes everything.

Amen.