

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
Lexington, Kentucky
The Sermon for October 24, 2010 ~ Proper 25C
Luke 18:9-14
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Jesus told a parable about two men who went to the Temple to pray. One of the men was a religious leader, a Pharisee. The other man was a tax collector. The contrast in the two men is set before us in such an exaggerated way that it would be almost impossible to miss the difference in them.

The Pharisee stood in the presence of God and prayed about how faithful he had been to all the religious customs and observances of his time. He was known for his piety and his sincerity in trying to do the things of God. There is no question that this man was in earnest about his religious life.

On the other hand, the tax collector was a man who was a collaborator with the occupation forces of Rome. He exploited his own people for his personal profit.

The portrait Jesus paints makes plain the outward contrasts in these two worshipers. But he doesn't stop there. He draws back the curtain so we can see through the window of their hearts. When he does, we realize that outward appearances are deceiving and we discover that the religious leader made some serious mistakes in his inner life.

He was mistaken in the way he thought about himself. In his inner life, it was not God who was at the center of the universe, but he himself. And unless we are very careful, we too can become egocentric and self-righteous. And when we do, we find ourselves evaluating all of life by how it affects us and what it means to our own future and how it bears upon the present moment.

The brilliant 20th Century English preacher W.E. Sangster told of talking to a coach one day in 1939 when the whole world was wondering if there was going to be another great war. The coach said to him, "Dr. Sangster, I just pray that we do not have another world war. You see, I think I shall have the finest football team this school has ever known." Here was a world hanging on the edge of hell itself, where literally millions of people would suffer and die, but this coach was thinking only of how it would affect his team's record and his career.

Contrast that with the life of one of the world's outstanding musicians, Johann Sebastian Bach. Carl Heim, in writing about Bach, says, "The most outstanding characteristic of this artist and that which distinguishes him at once from men like Beethoven or Wagner is that he never sought recognition for his work." It never entered his mind that his music was so great that it towered far above that of his contemporaries. He exercised his creative power without being self-conscious of it. At the head of his scores, he wrote the words *Soli Deo Gloria ano Jesu Christo*."

This parable of Jesus helps us see how easy it is for one to be mistaken about the way one sees oneself. We are not the center of life. Whenever we place ourselves in that position, we are always out of step because the ego is inflated. The inflated ego is always out of touch with the larger picture, out of touch with the life God intends us to live.

The Pharisee was also mistaken in the way he looked upon other people. When he looked at those who walked beside him, he despised them and felt superior to them. He felt that he had achieved and they had failed. He became very proud of his personal achievement. He was measuring his life against those about him. And so do we.

We can see this in almost every relationship in life. We see it in the life of our nation. It's not as easy to be haughty now as it has been for most of this nation's history.

We see it in the realm of the Church. When we compare the Church to other institutions of our day, we do quite well. There is a wonderful prayer that describes the Church this way, "When you compare her with all human institutions, we rejoice that there is none like her. But when we judge her by the mind of her master, we bow in contrition." This is how and why we should be measuring the Church, not by other institutions, or other faiths, but by the mind of Jesus Christ.

We see it in our individual lives. We are so prone to measure ourselves by others – others who have more than we have, others who have less than we have, and those who are just not like us. In fact, some people spend so much time trying to be like someone else that they never really become who they were meant to be.

Last week I was visiting with a young woman here in Lexington. When she found out I am from Texas, she asked if I had heard of Joel Osteen, the pastor of Lakewood Church who is an author and television preacher. I told her I actually had met Pastor Osteen as well as his brother and his later father. She then told me how much she admired how positive he is and how she wishes she could be like him. This was my response: "As far as I know, Joel Osteen is the Real McCoy. He inspires a lot of people. He is a wonderful example and we all need role models. But I believe he would tell you that God doesn't want you to be Joel Osteen. God wants you to be yourself – your true self."

Jesus' parable teaches us that the greatest evaluation is not how well we do when we compare ourselves with those who walk beside us but when we look into the face of Jesus. When we look at ourselves in this way, it's really difficult to be puffed up with pride. And, when we look at others from this perspective, we begin to join the human race – as did our Savior in his Incarnation.

And, perhaps the greatest mistake the Pharisee made was in the way he looked at God. Someone once said, "It is as bad to have a false *mental* image of God as it is to have a false *metal* image of God." It's obvious that the Pharisee believed that God was like a stock company and that he had earned the right to be one of the major stockholders. He deserved any day to be asked to be a director of the firm. Such a thought is no stranger to us. We all catch ourselves thinking about what we have done and what we deserve from God.

I hear it again and again from people, especially when they go through times of suffering and distress. They say, "I know I deserve better than this from God because I've done this and that all my life." Unconsciously, we build up in our minds the idea that we have some claim on God because of what we've done. It's a kind of spiritual mathematics. We do it by addition: We try to add virtues to our life so that we will be acceptable to God. We do it by subtraction: We look at our lives and try to decide what we can take out of them that will please God, things we can give up from ourselves, but not really ourselves. We do it by multiplication: We decide that we're not doing enough, that we need

to be more intense in our commitment to God. So we try to multiply the things we're doing in the hope we will please God more. We do it by division: We try to separate ourselves from those who are not like us so we will stand out in the eyes of God and others.

The point of all this spiritual mathematics is that we believe that what God wants is for us to become more righteous and then he will love us. It was Kirkegaard who pointed out so helpfully that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. When we sin, we try to offset it by adding another virtue and we find ourselves in a colossal bookkeeping arrangement with God. The point, of course, is to be one up on God.

But the answer is not to be found in what we can do but in accepting what God has already covenanted to do by his love, mercy, and grace. Our relationship to God is completely different than this mathematical approach. It's grounded in the heart of God. We grow into a right relationship with God not because we can stand and say what we've done but because we can stand and open our hearts to that which is in the heart of God. That is the meaning of the *Kyrie*, those words of the publican in the parable. The prayer, "Lord, have mercy" is an appeal directly to the heart of God, asking God to give to us what is in his heart he has decided we need, not what we deserve!

So, Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "The tax collector – who cried out to God for mercy – and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For everyone who makes himself great will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be made great."

The aim is to live in such a right and honest relationship with God, in the environment of grace, that the faith that is in our hearts may be manifested in our actions, so that the looks of a Christian will not be deceiving. So, pray for mercy today and always. For the prayer for mercy is the prayer directly to the heart of our Creator that what God desires for us to have and to know, we are ready and willing to receive.