

Us Vs. Them
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Luke 18:9-14

Right now, we are living in a world that's becoming increasingly polarized. It's gotten much worse in just the past couple of years, especially when it comes to politics. There is no in-between any more, much less the ability to have a civilized conversation across differences. Increasingly, the rhetoric we hear about groups and/or specific individuals has gone well beyond the point of simple name-calling, to the point where it's actually becoming difficult for those groups and individuals to go about their daily routines without having to worry about whether they will be verbally harassed or physically attacked. The net effect of all of this has been the deepening of the "us vs. them" dichotomy – where the "them" is an utterly contemptible group of "others" who have to be contained, or better yet, destroyed, at all costs.

This setup is nothing new. It's probably as old as humanity itself. Let's face it: it feels GOOD to think, and act, as if we're better than someone else, including being glad we aren't one of THEM. You know, the people who do weird stuff like cutting the crusts off their sandwiches, or cheering for the wrong team, or practicing their religion the wrong way. So it should probably come as little surprise that Jesus chooses to address this very issue, with a parable aimed squarely at some of his followers who seemed to trust just a bit too much in their own righteousness.

The contrast between the two characters in the parable couldn't be much bigger. On the one hand, we have a Pharisee who seems to play into all the stereotypes about how the Pharisees as a group practiced their faith. Not only has he come up to the Temple to pray, he also says he fasts twice a week and even gives a way one tenth of

his income. Notice how Luke NEVER says these are bad things! It's only our modern sensibilities, informed as they are by centuries of reading into this text that Pharisees are bad, that encourage us to see him that way. New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine highlights the danger in such an approach:

"To suggest that every pilgrim who went to the Temple, every worshipper who found it a particular site of holiness, every Jew who participated in ancestral traditions was misguided, ideologically complicit in imperial, colonial control, or otherwise unaware of how this institution was manipulating the peasantry, is to impose on these earlier worshippers a modern, anti-institutional, generally Protestant view of ritual. It is to deny the Jewish connection to the Temple, a connection shared by Jesus's followers, who continued to worship there. Such claims also misunderstand the ongoing Jewish connection to the Kotel, the Western Wall of the Jerusalem Temple, which remains the holiest site in Judaism."¹

So this Pharisee is doing exactly what he understands is required of him as part of his relationship with God, no more and no less. But, his sense of where his righteousness comes from – that is, it's rooted only within himself - might be a bit misplaced. Hold on to that thought for a moment.

The other character in this story is a tax collector, a downright icky figure who made his living directly on the backs of his neighbors. Anything he might have collected beyond the amounts prescribed by his Roman employers, he got to keep. Grift and outright extortion were often essential parts of the job, and very often came at the

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 185.

expense of relationships with and respect of one's neighbors. Needless to say, they were not regarded highly at all. This tax collector's presence in the Temple would have been unexpected, and perhaps even uncomfortable. But. He's there for the same reason the Pharisee is, and that's to talk to God about what's going on in his life. The only difference is, he locates righteousness, and the actions it will take to help save him from the sin of exploitation, with God. That's a very different place, and a very different set of solutions than the ones the Pharisee tries to use – and all of them rely entirely on God's grace to come about.

These two characters are caricatures, exaggerations of real-life people. They remind me a little of Ned Flanders and Homer Simpson. It makes perfect sense, if you think about it: Flanders, the fastidious pray-er and churchgoer, who's often depicted showing off just how committed he is to his faith and the First Church of Springfield; and Homer, the lazy and obnoxious neighbor who's famous for stealing Flanders' lawn equipment and doing his best to escape his obligations. I can almost hear Flanders voicing the words of the Pharisee: "God, I thank you that I'm not like that bad neighborino, the tax collector. I've done everything the Bible says – even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff!"² Likewise, I can almost hear Homer thinking in the exact opposite direction: "I'd sell my soul for a donut. Mmmmm, donut."³

These responses are what we have come to expect from Flanders and Homer over the thirty-plus years *The Simpsons* has been on television. So too do we expect

² "Hurricane Neddy." *The Simpsons*. Writ. Steve Young. Dir. Bob Anderson. Original air date: December 29, 1996.

³ "Treehouse of Horror IV." *The Simpsons*. Writ. Conan O'Brien, Bill Oakley, Josh Weinstein, Greg Daniels, Dan McGrath, and Bill Canterbury. Dir. David Silverman. Original air date: October 28, 1993.

the Pharisee and the tax collector to behave as they do, thanks to year of hearing this parable as a commentary on who does what in relationship to God the right way. At its core, it's not as simple as "Pharisee and works righteousness bad, tax collector and justification by faith alone, good!" and it is definitely not what Jesus is trying to tell us. It's really a parable about God, and how it is God alone who "can judge the human heart."⁴ Remember, its context is right smack in the middle of a long lecture about discipleship. The Pharisee's apparent contempt for others, and NOT his religiously-motivated practice, is what gets in his way. It's not an easy thing to work with. Even the saintly Ned Flanders struggles with it from time to time. Though being under stress is THE thing which brings frustration and anger out in him, his outbursts in those situations make it very clear that, despite all community service he does, he doesn't think very highly of his neighbors – especially Homer, whom he calls, "... the worst human being [he's] ever met."⁵

So just what are we, the heirs of the disciples who first heard the parable, supposed to do about it?

The challenge Jesus sets out in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is how to avoid trusting too much in our own self-centered sense of righteousness and the ability to get things done on our own. Instead, we are called to be humble in the presence of a loving and merciful God. It's hard, especially in a culture

⁴ David Lose, "Commentary on Luke 18:9-14." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-2> [accessed October 17, 2022].

⁵ "Hurricane Neddy."

which places great value on individual achievement and effort.⁶ To put it another way, what's called for is a sort of reformation, accomplished on a personal level. The subtle "ask" contained in the parable is one of self-examination. We are to stop, take a breath, look around, and ask: am I motivated by my own understanding of God and my own self-interests in preserving it, my need for God's mercy, or perhaps some combination of both?

If we actually listen for the answer, it might be surprising. And, it just might help us to, as St. Ignatius of Loyola emphasized in promoting this kind of questioning as an essential spiritual practice, respond to the invitation to find God in all things – and most especially in those people from whom we differ the most.

⁶ Laura S. Sugg, "Pastoral Perspective: Luke 18:9-14." In *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 214.