

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Luke 18:9-14

You may have heard the story about the turtle who wanted to come to Florida for the winter? He knew he could never walk all the way, so he talked to the two ducks who shared his pond. They were better equipped for long-distance travel. He found a piece of stout cord and persuaded each of them to take an end while he, with his strong jaws, held on in the center. It was a pleasant flight, and everything was going as planned until someone on the ground looked up and said with admiration, "Who in the world thought of that?" Unable to restrain the impulse to take full credit for the idea, the turtle opened his mouth to say, "I did."

Bragging, pride, arrogance, egotism, call it what you want, it can sure get you into a lot of trouble. Words and actions fueled by this kind of attitude can be demeaning and insensitive. Just look what is happening in politics today. We have presidential candidates who seem more intent on attacking one another's character than telling Americans their goals for our country. We have two political parties who can't get any work done for our country because each thinks they are better than the other. We have world religions who believe they are holier-than-thou and so they have the right to pass judgment on others and kill those opposing them. We have the rich in the world who feel they deserve what they have, and they watch as innocent men, women and children die of starvation in third-world countries. There's no denying that pride is alive and growing in our world. It's sad, really, really sad.

Jesus had plenty to say about the dangers of pride. We find in the scripture that Fred read for us this morning that Jesus was speaking to "some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." The Pharisees were the specific targets in Jesus' audience." But wow, it is super relevant to us today.

The parable has two characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Jesus concentrates first on the Pharisee's prayer. In Jesus' day, most people did not feel the Pharisees were bad people. They were taught to see them as well-disciplined pious men of the Jewish law. They were viewed as role models of the faith. So Jesus used the Pharisee in his parable to show the people that all people, no matter how religious, are vulnerable to falling into the same kind of sinful trap as this man did.

In the story, the Pharisee went to the temple to pray. It was a common practice for people to go to the temple to pray. Devout Jews prayed three times a day: 9:00 in the morning, midday and 3:00 in the afternoon. Some people would go to the temple to pray because they believed praying there made their prayers more effective.

The Pharisee thought pretty highly of himself. Notice that Jesus tells us that not only was he in the temple, but he was standing, not sitting or kneeling. This posture suggests that he wanted to be seen. He did not assume a posture that might be perceived as humility.

Jesus essentially tells us that the man stood up and began to talk about himself. The Pharisee began his prayer seemingly addressing God, but then immediately began talking about himself with pride. It wasn't a conversation with God. It was more as if he was having a conversation with himself. It was as though he wanted to be heard so he could impress those around him. The Pharisee's does not praise or honor God, he does not acknowledge God's help in his life, nor does he ask for God's help. It's almost like the Pharisee tells God, "I don't really need you; I'm doing quite well on my own.

What makes it seem even more obvious that the Pharisee was trying to impress people is the mentioning that he fasts twice a week and he gives a tenth of all he gets. He was definitely

feeling pretty good about himself. You see, the Jews were only required to fast one time a year and that was on the Day of Atonement, but he wanted others to know that he fasted twice a week. That's pretty impressive. Those who wished to gain special rewards or recognition fasted on Mondays and Thursdays of the week.

Bible commentary William Barclay writes that Monday and Thursdays were market days in the city and as one might expect, the marketplace was full of people on those days. Barclay says that those who fasted on those days often times walked through the marketplace with whitened faces and disheveled clothes to show-off their piety.

It was also a requirement in Jesus' day that all Jews were to give one tenth of their produce to the Levites, the caretakers of the temple, so that they could focus their attention on their work. Notice, they were only required to give one tenth of their produce, but this Pharisee said that he gave one tenth of ALL that he had. He definitely felt quite proud of himself.

The lion was proud of his mastery of the animal kingdom. One day he decided to make sure all the other animals knew he was the king of the jungle. He was so confident that he bypassed the smaller animals and went straight to the bear. "Who is the king of the jungle?" the lion asked. The bear replied, "Why you are, of course" The lion gave a mighty roar of approval. Next he asked the tiger, "Who is the king of the jungle?" The tiger quickly responded, "Everyone knows that you are, mighty lion" Next on the list was the elephant. The lion faced the elephant and addressed his question, "Who is the king of the jungle?" The elephant immediately grabbed the lion with his trunk, whirled him around in the air five or six times and slammed him into a tree. Then he pounded him onto the ground several times, dunked him under water in a nearby lake, and finally dumped him out on the shore. The lion--beaten, bruised, and battered--struggled to his feet. He looked at the elephant through sad and bloody eyes and said, "Look, just because you don't know the answer is no reason for to get mean about it!"

Jesus used this parable to make it easy for the listeners to recognize the hypocrisy that some live. He made it clear that even people of God can become self-righteous and proud. The self-righteous are usually too busy judging others and putting down those who they deem inferior for whatever reason, that they lose sight of God's call to obedience to worship and love God first, and to love their neighbor.

Jesus then turns our attention to the tax collector who went to the temple to pray. Jesus tells us that his posture was such that he stood at a distance, perhaps he didn't want anyone to notice he was there. He bowed his head instead of looking to heaven and he beat his chest, it was a posture that suggests a spirit of humility. We get the sense that he felt unworthy of God's attention. The tax collector's prayer was simple, "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

Those who heard him likely felt he did not belong in the temple. Tax collectors were not popular. They worked for the oppressive Roman government. The community felt they were ritually unclean and social outcasts. Many tax collectors were corrupt. They taxed people more than the Romans required, and kept the extra for themselves. Those listening to the story definitely did not want to identify with this kind of person.

Not once does Jesus say that the tax collector was unworthy to be in God's temple. In fact he is used as an example of someone who has a conscience and recognizes he needs mercy and forgiveness. The tax collector's posture and prayer were an expression of need, a need for God. He knew he was a sinner; he could not live a Godly lifestyle on his own, he needed God's help.

Then Jesus said at the end of the story that unlike the Pharisee, this man went home justified, in a right relationship with God. I can only imagine the reaction of the people listening to this story. They were likely surprised over Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisee, their spiritual leader

*November 19, 2023 - "Really? You're Thankful for That?"*

and then his defense for the tax collector, knowing full well that tax collectors took advantage of their position to prosper.

A church had two candidates for the governing board. One was a model Christian who worked, prayed, and gave for the spread of the kingdom. She was a fine Christian in every way. The other candidate was a scoundrel, who sometimes showed up for worship, was lax in her giving, and showed little progress in the spiritual life. The latter, quite to everyone's surprise, won the election. One church member summed it up when she explained why she voted as she did: "I didn't vote for the first candidate, because she acts as if God needs her. I voted for the second candidate; she lives as one who needs God desperately!"

This parable challenges us to find our place in the story. We are challenged to consider whether we are more like the Pharisee or the tax collector. Are we telling God that we don't need him, or do we let God know we desperately need him? We are faced with the question: Are the purposes for what we say and do done more to benefit ourselves, or others, or for what we want rather than what others need, or to defend our sense of what is fair rather than scriptural compassion, or for peer acceptance rather than social justice.?

It's an important question because if it is all about us, it's not about God. Jesus said, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Let's live our faith and make our words and actions all about God, glorifying God rather than ourselves, today and every day. Amen.