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The Storyteller: They Like Jesus...Not the Church Doesn't God Like Religious People?

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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Luke 18:9—14

Jesus is the Master Storyteller because Jesus is the Master of Life. And Jesus tells enough stories that you have to wonder if in fact God doesn't like religious people... *Luke 18:9 "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

In 2007, we pay more attention to opinion polls than we do stories. And today a number of polls have seem to indicate that younger generations like Jesus...but not the church. Is there a connection? Jesus was always saying things in story form because what he had to say may have been difficult to accept. That's why Jesus begins "Once upon a time, these two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Instantly you're stuck—who do you root for? The tax collectors were despised and the Pharisees were admired but nobody liked them!

The 2 men prayed. You know the story. The Pharisee "prayed about himself." After saying how relieved he was not to be any of the people around him, he inventoried his spirituality for God: fasting and praying. Meanwhile, the tax collector was praying, more like crying, "God, have mercy on me a sinner." The crowd was enjoying Jesus' story. They may have been nauseated by the Pharisee, but they'd experienced first-hand why the tax collector ought to stand far away and weep about his cheating and lying and selling out to the foreign Roman occupation.

But as usual, the end of Jesus' story shocked them. (Jesus usually did that). The tax collector went home justified (or lined up) with God and the Pharisee didn't! Everybody likes this story, because we identify with the tax collector. We put ourselves as the humble one who confessed we didn't deserve anything. We know it's God we're talking to. We like his humility. Sure, he was a jerk and sold out his family and friends. He had plenty to be humble about. But even so, he was truly humble. So, we leave this story like the tax collector—humble and humbled. And that's the problem...

Because Jesus probably intended for us to hear it from the viewpoint of the Pharisee. Remember how Luke introduces it? "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable" Luke 18:9. Jesus wasn't trying to make tax collectors feel better; he was trying to wake up the *rest* of us Pharisees.

It's not easy. I don't *like* the Pharisee. But I resemble the Pharisee more than I care to admit. You've probably asked yourself the question "Why me, Lord?" That's a Pharisee's question. We assume there are other people who deserve our troubles more than we ourselves. I don't deserve this!

You hear this parable and you want to sneak away and ask yourself "Where have I gone wrong? Why doesn't God like me? And how come He likes the tax collector better than me?" (Now, we probably don't pray like him, but if you're honest, chances are you've thought some of those words to yourself.) After all, you can *trust* the Pharisee. He was honest, he was just, he wasn't sleeping around. He might not be very fun, but you wouldn't have to worry about him either. You could trust him. And he was spiritual! Tithing and fasting. He was even thankful in a way. We've always thought of the Pharisee as the opposition in this parable. But when you really stop, you and I are pretty close, whether or not we're in church regularly or not. We read the news and say "Why can't the rest of the world be more like me?" Don't you ever wonder that??? And isn't that the Pharisee's prayer, even though we say it over the paper or at a business lunch rather than at church?

So why doesn't Jesus appreciate the Pharisee, (or us for that matter)? Several reasons:

First, the Pharisee was using religion to hold God at a distance. Spirituality is supposed to draw us nearer to God, and then closer to other people. But the Pharisee was using his spirituality to hold God at a safe distance, and other people at a level below. God wanted a place in his heart, but the Pharisee wanted to give God a place in the ritual. God wanted truth and sincerity within his heart; the Pharisee wanted a set of rules and a cause to make himself feel noble about.

Second, we like religion we can measure. The Pharisee tithed and fasted, which are measurable, which God said to do. (How sad that more Christians don't. Imagine the resources brought to bear in this community alone if we *all* did!) But measuring your spirituality protects you from more demanding claim the Lord has on your heart. For example, Jesus names stuff that can't be measured like "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" The more you give, the more you'll receive. And we say "There's no end to that! It grows as I grow and I'll never catch up!" So we never start where we are. We never even take the first step. Instead, we play some comfortable Christian game we can measure.

Third, we've lost our humility. We will never catch up to the claims the Lord has on your heart, which is why true worship *should* make us humble. In humility we're more apt to love God and love people. But the Pharisee's spirituality made him proud. He looked around and looked down on the other people. And you can't make a case for loving God when you hate your brother or sister. "*If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*" 1 John 4:20-21. In this regard, the Pharisee was in big trouble. True spirituality makes us feel our need for God, so that we're drawn to Him. Jesus the Storyteller is saying the Pharisee (and many of us!) had the kind of spirituality that makes you feel you can get along without God. Think about it: isn't that what the Pharisee's prayer was all about?

Charles Clay Morrison, a journalist from 100 years ago, once said "the church is the only institution in the world whose membership is based on unworthiness to be a member." ☺ A fact we have a hard time believing, because we're "good people." It's easier to be a good citizen and "be spiritual" than to be convicted of sin by God's Spirit. We can feel as "spiritual" as we want to feel. We can work for peace and justice and evangelism, we can read our Bibles, and still never be aware of sins that are ruling our lives and the lives of the people we live with. Ouch! That's the danger we face: We're just good enough to shut ourselves out of the grace of God.

The heart of the matter isn't that God doesn't like good people. It is that good people don't like God. We don't like to be reminded how desperately we are in need of God's grace. We tend to avoid the whole conversation about sin, Jesus' death on the cross, blood dripping, and all that weird, alien-feeling yucky stuff that adds up to God's grace.

Most of us are *much* more in danger of the sins of the Pharisee than the tax collector. We're not guilty of too many heinous sins. We've stayed clear of them, not because those sins were unattractive to us, but because we're afraid of the social, legal, or physical consequences.

So, what is it about the Pharisee (and you and me) that interferes? Pride. Pride's tricky, because it's an essential part of who we are. Seriously, when we first come to faith in Christ, part of our transformation is God restoring in us a sense of dignity and self-worth, which is pride. But pride changes...it becomes twisted...and we become better than someone else. And then it becomes impossible to repent, because we have to acknowledge we were wrong. And pride makes it difficult to accept grace, because grace is humbling. Pride would rather do it alone. Most of the normal sins of us "good people" like impatience, irritability, and self-indulgence have behind them that original, usually invisible sin of pride. [We are SO "Pharisee!"]

It's like Jesus was saying "No one is really any good until he or she knows how bad they might be...."

That's really tough for good people, because we don't wear our sins on our sleeves. Jeffrey Lynn Speller, a special lecturer at Harvard University, says that upper-income people and executives are often surrounded by a conspiracy of silence. The people around them are made silent by a vested interest in the person's prestige and income. Close subordinates are afraid they might lose their jobs if the person were fired. Even colleagues are silent because they fear company losses, if people find out that the executives were dysfunctional. Good moral people, including church leaders, are in the same situation, and pride works on, unchecked.

Martin Luther, who began the Protestant Reformation, called repentance a life task. Maybe he was warning us of this parable: when we become good, we need *more than ever* to be experts in repentance.

The writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in *Aurora Leigh*, lists all the ways good people can, self-blinded, do evil, and then she cries, "Now may the good God pardon all good people!" To which *this* Pharisee says, Amen.