

# Two Types of People

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*The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

## Scripture: Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV)

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."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – Two Types of People

We've all heard the common phrases:

There are two types of people in this world: those who wake up and say Good Morning Lord, and those who say Good Lord, it's morning!

Marlo Thomas once said:

"There are two types of people in this world, the givers and the takers. The takers may eat better, but the givers sleep better."

Woody Allen's thoughts on the topic:

"There are two types of people in this world: the good and the bad. The good sleep better, but the bad seem to enjoy the waking hours much more."

In our scripture today, Jesus is telling a parable about two types of people. In Biblical times, people who lived near Jerusalem often went to the temple to pray. Jesus knows this practice and uses it to share a story about two types of "church people": a Pharisee and a tax collector. Two very different people. The Pharisee, who seemingly goes to pray but in the process is really announcing to everyone within earshot how good of a person he is. And the Tax collector, who, unable to look up to pray, recognizes his sin and begs for mercy.

In the Pharisee, Jesus is showing us how "good church people" can succumb to self-righteousness and how that can be dangerous, as it leads to pride and causes a person to despise others and prevent them learning anything from God. The Pharisee's actions essentially cut him off from God and other people.

The Pharisee's attention is neither on God nor on the tax collector, but on himself. He uses the first pronoun "I" four times in succession. The Pharisee doesn't need anything from God, he's already got it all. His universe revolves around himself. He compares himself only to the worst elements of society and pronounces himself excellent by comparison. His overblown ego has taken over and it negates his need for God.

Charlie Chaplin, known for his competitive nature and perfectionism, decided to host a look-alike contest to see if he was the best looking Charlie Chaplin around. Unfortunately for him, he came in third. Not a giant ego booster for him.

How often have we compared ourselves to others we see as less than or not as good as us? When we pick a standard for comparison, we need to look higher.

The only faithful standard is Jesus. If we compare ourselves to him our sin will be obvious, and we won't be tempted to take on the pride that taints the Pharisee.

How many times in my life have I thought or dared to say out loud, "God, I thank you that I'm not like \_\_\_\_\_" (fill in your own blank there). If we're honest, we've all used that phrase at one time or another to bolster our pride, shore up our self-image, or look better. Not the best side of us.

Sometimes I wonder, what's underneath those statements? Why respond in such a manner? Am I hiding something? Because really what I'm saying is

*"Look at me look at me Ohohohoh, look what I have (or what I am doing)!"*

In the parable, the Pharisee isn't describing his faith or spiritual practices, he's keeping score—and letting everyone around him know the score. Score keeping as such is usually a symptom of something else. Could it be emptiness, loss of meaning or brokenness? Lack of fulfillment? We use the comparison to convince ourselves everything is okay, our life is perfect.

In 1954, psychologist Leon Festinger named the Social Comparison Theory. The theory is that we have an innate drive to evaluate ourselves in comparison to others. We compare ourselves to those who are better when we want inspiration to improve, and we compare ourselves to those who are worse when we want to feel better about ourselves.

There's a great example in our Children's Message today. Comparing ourselves stops us from learning all that we have to learn in life from those who are young and old alike. I don't think I'll be doing any backflips anytime soon, however Jude has already taught me about working hard, being persistent and keeping my eye on the prize.

Let's also remember this isn't a "good versus evil" kind of story. The Pharisee was a respected, educated, faithful, and holy person. The tax collector is not a better person, he was a crook, a legal one at that. He worked with the Roman Empire to extort money from his own people. He was despised and feared. But both men are broken inside. The point Jesus is making is that the tax collector KNOWS he is dead inside; he offers God true repentance and the Pharisee does not.

This parable invites us to stop keeping score. To be honest with ourselves and with God. When we come before God and hold up our failures, disappointments, falling apart, and breaking down. The emptiness, addiction, suffering, where we no longer dream dreams. When we authentically bring these to God with a repentant heart, it opens a new door to a new world, a fresh start and a new day.

So really, there are two types of people in this world, and as columnist Dave Barry says: I am one of them. We are both Pharisee and tax collector. As Martin Luther explained: we are simultaneously sinner and saint. A beloved child of God, able to be transformed and redeemed by the grace of God.

In verse 14 Jesus tells the crowd to be humble.

*"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."*

The Pharisee refused to be humble and cut himself off from God and others. The tax collector knew and owned his brokenness, leaving a way to humbleness and God open wide.

Is humbleness and humility a trait we can learn? Are we born with it? Is it a trait we're taught early in life and if we didn't soak it up as children, are we lost to the gift? Is there a book or perhaps a "How To Be Humble" video on YouTube? And how much of our humility is wrapped in a sense of self compassion?

Through the years with the help of a few mentors, I've learned that when we're kind to ourselves the comparing seems to lessen. Really think about that a minute: when we're kind to OURSELVES our comparing ourselves to others lessens.

Tim Denning, Australian, entrepreneur, life coach, author, writer for news organizations like CNBC and "Business Insider," reflects on humility in his motivational speeches and blog.

- He theorizes that humility can be learned, and honed as you might learn a skill, to bring about personal success. He writes that with humility, we are better teammates because we recognize that there is no "I" in team—that working with others offers up bigger results.
- Also, he says that you will question everything because you can readily admit that you don't know everything. You're more open to learning from others and growing in the process.
- Thirdly he notes that humble people are like chameleons. Those who are humble will work and serve in any capacity needed. Such as the leader who is found in the kitchen doing dishes and isn't complaining about it. Flexibility and nimbleness helps them see how everyone is necessary and important.
- Lastly, humble people recognize their own flaws. Just as the tax collector was aware of his flaws and sought forgiveness, the humble come forward knowing there are some things other people are better at, and they aren't afraid of it.

As CS Lewis once said: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less."

When we hang onto the comparison game, we lose. When we come with humbleness, we see things differently. We see God differently, instead of someone to call on when we need something or a duty to perform, God becomes a very real part of our everyday lives.

So as you consider these two people: The Pharisee and the Tax collector, remember there's a choice to be made each day about which side you share with God and with others.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Pharisee and the Tax Collector" (*artist unknown*)

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