

Have Mercy on Me!

Preached on The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
August 15, 2021
Text: Lk. 18: 9-14; 1 Cor. 15: 1-11

Our Gospel reading this morning employs what could be called the stock characters of the publican and the Pharisee. We use the word “stock” because these were types often used in rabbinical teaching during the first century. If you wanted your story to have a bad character, you threw a publican or tax collector in there. They worked for and with an occupying, pagan state, and therefore willingly aided it in its oppression of the Jews. They were despised by their countrymen as collaborators and also as thieves, given the Roman expectation that as long as the required taxes were collected, they didn’t care how much the collector got for himself. The system rewarded the dishonest, the extortionist, and the shakedown artist. These people were considered true lowlifes.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, would have been seen as a good, upright, and pious person to Jesus’s audience. He is the person whose counterpart today would be there every time the church doors open, volunteering for all the committees, always wondering if there is something else he can do. In the first century, the Pharisees went way beyond the amount of fasting required and tithed not only on income, but on purchases as well. Externally, he was the model Jew, a paragon and example to his countrymen.

In our reading, the Pharisee enters the temple with great confidence in his secure standing before God. He stands apart from those whose inferior piety might contaminate him, striking a conspicuous pose, and lifting his eyes to heaven, as he begins presenting his moral resume. Praying out loud was the Jewish way and definitely was the tradition of the Pharisees. And though we consider it quite untoward, this Pharisee probably does not share our shame at public boasting. He is exhibiting the sin of pride in all of its variations.

First, he is arrogant in that he attributes every good thing within him to himself, not to God. He is the proverbial “self-made man.” Second, he is presumptuous in that he acknowledges that God has given him grace, but that he really merits it. The good he has he somehow deserves. Third, he is boasting of an eminence he does not truly possess. “I thank thee that I am not as other men are.” And fourth, he despises others and glories in seeing how much better he is than them.

Hence, his prayer is really a monologue: acknowledging no need; seeking no blessing; confessing no lack; admitting no sin; and beseeching no mercy. He enumerates his virtues—and that’s it. He is praising himself, denigrating the publican, and ignoring God. Although God is mentioned, the prayer was actually with himself. His performance is really an exercise in contradiction. Through his prayer he is actually congratulating himself for having no need to pray, in the sense of asking for pardon, or peace, or righteousness. He also possesses no compassion for others in their struggles; they are only

foils which serve to accentuate his virtue. He does not compare his own imperfections with the infinite perfections of God, but with the imagined greater imperfections of his fellow-men. He stands on the shore in splendid isolation, looking with contempt—not with pity—on those who are still struggling in the deep waters.

The publican, on the other hand, knows he has no claim on God’s favor. He stands afar off, not in the self-assertive way of the Pharisee, but as one who truly experiences his estrangement from a holy God. Standing thus at a distance, he “would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven,” much less his hands, as was usual in prayer. He truly lifted up his heart to God; but, through shame and humiliation, did not lift up his eyes in holy confidence and courage. His iniquities were a heavy burden, so that he was not able to look up; and his downcast looks were an indication of his sorrow at facing his sinfulness and guilt. He “smote upon his breast” in a holy indignation at himself. His address to God was the very reverse of that of the Pharisee: as full of humility and humiliation, as the Pharisee’s was of pride and ostentation; as full of repentance for sin and desire toward God, as the Pharisee’s was of confidence in himself and his own righteousness and sufficiency. This prayer of the publican was short because fear and shame hindered him from saying much. “God be merciful to me a sinner!” He owns himself to be a sinner, and guilty before God; whereas the Pharisee spoke as if he were pure from sin. The publican throws himself upon the mercy of God; the Pharisee insists upon the merit of his unblameable conduct, his fastings and tithes. The publican knows he does not have a leg to stand on, so merit does not even enter into it. He cries out for mercy. The word Luke uses here for mercy is not the more common word for mercy in the New Testament, the noun *eleios*, the word we use at Holy Communion in the *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have mercy). Rather, it is the intransitive verb *hilaskomai*. This is more sacrificial language, and carries the idea of necessary atonement. It means more than simple compassion or pity. It could be translated as “O God, be propitious to me.” The publican is begging God to forgive his sins, to be reconciled to him. He wants his sins to “be covered” as they were by the blood of the unblemished lamb on the Mercy Seat.

The Pharisee’s prayer rose no higher than where he stood. He received nothing because he asked for nothing. His prayer was an exercise in futility and an affront to God. The prayer of the publican, on the other hand, was filled with the earnestness of a soul burdened with sin. It confessed his sin, besought the Lord for mercy, and was attested by his sorrow and shame. This was one of few prayers Jesus ever commended. The publican returned home justified, but the Pharisee did not.

At this point, we are all primed to hear about how we should be humble like the publican, not self-righteous like the Pharisee. And there is no doubt that Christians are enjoined throughout the New Testament to practice humility. Furthermore, many people in our post-Christian culture still frown on the braggart and appreciate humility—at least in others. But Asian cultures also have an ethic of being humble and not tooting their own horn. Is this all we are really talking about when we speak of Christian humility?

Many in our culture might think so. They view the humble person as one who, when complimented on something good he or she did, says “Aw shucks, it’s really no big deal.” Or we might think that the humble person is one who is constantly running himself down. It is more helpful, however, to see humility as an accurate assessment of who we are in relation to God as well as a true appreciation of the unfathomable lengths he has gone to restore our relationship with him. To achieve this will require growth in self-knowledge, throwing ourselves on God’s mercy, and adopting the mind of Christ, the greatest example of humility in history. We can do none of this in our own power, but only through earnest and continual praying in the Holy Spirit. It is a task for a lifetime.

The Pharisee in the parable could well have been telling the truth about his scrupulous observance of God’s ordinances, his going above and beyond what the law required. So why did he not go back home justified? Because he did not see where he really stood in relation to God and man. In trusting in his own righteousness he revealed that he was not well-acquainted with himself and did not truly see how far he fell short of the glory of God. Hence, he could not be properly humbled before God, nor show true repentance toward him. Without this there can be no forgiveness. Prayer should be bringing us more and more to a realization of God’s holiness and majesty conjoined with a realization of our spiritual poverty. If this isn’t happening, it is difficult to call it prayer. It is more a mindless formalism. As the 19th century Methodist commentator Joseph Benson wryly put it, the Pharisee “went up to the temple indeed to pray, but, it appears, forgot his errand...”

Now if God shows his mercy to the greatest of sinners, is there any hope for the Pharisee? Can he be saved? For in our day, Pharisee has lost its first century positive connotation and become synonymous with legalistic, loveless, hypocrites. Does God show mercy to a Pharisee? Well, to answer that we can look at our Epistle for today. St. Paul was a Pharisee. As he says in Philippians,

[i]f any man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (3: 4b-7)

And in verse 9 of our Epistle, Paul says

I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed on me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” (vv. 9-10)

If God can save traitors and cheats like Zacchaeus and Matthew, and puffed-up Pharisees like Paul, he can save you and me. When by grace and the blood of Christ we come before God’s throne, we will probably be in for some surprises. There will likely be

all sorts of people in God's family no one would have expected. But at some point they responded to God's Spirit and fell down on their knees and said "Have mercy on me, a sinner." They took that first step of humility and began to see who they really were, and God met them there. This is the God who knows the proud from afar, but dwells with him "that is of a contrite and humble spirit." (Is. 57: 15) May we be among that company.

In the Name...