

Date: October 24, 2001

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 30

**SERMON: The Good, The Bad, and the Justified**

Text(s): Luke 18:9-14; Joel 2:23-32

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During this election season, one of the subjects that we're hearing a lot about is taxes. Here in Maine, we're in the midst of an intense debate about whether we need, not only tax cuts, but a tax cap on property taxes.

However, while taxes often occupy center stage in political debates and election campaigns, and often generates extremely heated opinions on all sides of the issue, at least our political debates tend to focus on the taxes themselves—are taxes good or bad, are they high enough or too high, do we need to reform the tax system, etc. We don't usually debate the character of the tax collector. The IRS or the Maine tax authorities are not personified by individuals; they're structured bureaucracies run by ordinary 9-5 government civil servants who more or less do their jobs like anyone else.

But the job of collecting taxes was not always so anonymous or bureaucratized. In the Roman colonies, the job of tax collector was frequently given to local people who collaborated willingly with the Roman governors, and they were regarded as traitors by many of their fellow citizens. Even those who didn't regard them as traitors, certainly regarded them as rapacious and ruthless crooks. For Rome had evolved a rather simple, corrupt, but effective system for collecting taxes from people who might not be all that happy about paying taxes to an occupying government. They told the person they appointed as tax collector exactly how much tax revenue they expected to come into the government coffers. However, they did not set any limits on how much he could collect. The tax collector was free to collect as much as he could gouge out of people, and as long as he collected at least enough to meet Rome's demand, then whatever else he collected was his business, as were the

methods he used to collect the taxes. In other words, tax collecting was a highly profitable business.

It's little wonder, then, that when Jesus chose two characters for this parable that he should choose two who represented the most admired and the most despised people of his day. Though we often think of the Pharisees in a negative light, largely on the strength of gospel stories like this one and others where they are portrayed as Jesus' opponents, in fact, the Pharisees were among the best people of their day, and were admired and respected for their sincere devotion to the Torah, the Law of God. They not only talked the talk, but, for the most part, they walked the walk. So Luke's introduction to this story, "*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous,*" is not meant to suggest that all Pharisees were self-righteous hypocrites, as many modern readers of the gospels assume. Luke's point is nowhere nearly that simplistic. Think of the best, most admirable person you know and respect, and you'll get some feel for how Jesus' hearers must have reacted when that person became the negative example in the story.

The point of the story hinges on the way in which each of these men seeks justification for his life. Seeking justification for our lives is something that every one of us does. We all want and need to know that our life counts for something, has some ultimate significance or meaning. People of faith tend to ground the meaning of their existence in God as the Ultimate Reality or Ultimate Meaning which gives our individual lives their meaning. But even folks who are not believers, need and seek justification. We can't help it; it's both the glory and the curse of being human. While some extremely cynical persons might accept meaninglessness as a fact of human existence, their numbers are not large. Most of us need to feel that our existence is justified. So it's not simply the seeking for justification that marks the difference between these two men. It's how they seek it, and where ultimately they put their trust and hope.

The story begins with both men “going up” to the Temple to pray. It ends with both of them “going down” to their houses. Between the going up and the going down, however, some very significant things happen. Jesus tells the story of the Pharisee first. *“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.”* That’s the first key description of this man. The subject of his prayer is not God, but himself. For him, prayer is an exercise in telling God who he is. Notice all the “I’s” in this prayer: *“I thank thee O God, that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of everything I purchase. . . .”* I . . . I . . . I . . .

Whenever I read this parable, I can’t help remembering a story I heard about a the star-struck tourist who was visiting Hollywood some years ago. He made reservations at a restaurant where he knew he’d probably see some movie stars. When he got there, he had to stand in a fairly long line, waiting to be seated. As he scanned the others in the line, he spotted Gregory Peck a little further up the line than he was. He immediately went up to Greg Peck and said, “Mr. Peck, why are you standing in line out here like all the rest of us? I’m sure if you went up to the front and told them who you are, they’d get you a table right away.” Gregory Peck smiled at him and replied, “Well, I reckon if you have to tell them who you are, you ain’t.” This particular Pharisee would have been better off if he’d had Gregory Peck there to whisper that bit of wisdom in his ear.

No doubt the Pharisee feels genuinely grateful that he’s a solid, morally-upright person. This prayer is not an exaggerated creation for the sake of the story; in some of the rabbinic writings, and even in some of the Psalms, such as Psalm 26, we find similar prayers. The things he’s thankful that he doesn’t do, however, are probably not things that are a great source of temptation to him—extortion, adultery, treason—any more than those particular sins are

temptations to most of us. Imagine yourself coming to church and thanking God that you haven’t murdered anyone, robbed any banks, or made any drug deals this past week. Were you even seriously in danger of doing any of those things? Not likely.

No, there’s nothing to fault in the accuracy of his self-assessment as far as it goes. He looks at the obvious, and concludes that he’s all right. He has demonstrated to his own satisfaction (and presumably to God’s satisfaction as well) that his life is worthwhile, that he’s a good person, that he knows the difference between right and wrong. He faithfully does his duty. So he approaches God with a clear conscience and with every expectation of receiving God’s approval and favor.

The tax collector is also accurate in his self-assessment. He has good reason to stand over in the corner, away from the community of the righteous, away from the center of prayer. He has good reason to feel that he should not even lift his face to heaven, as is customary in prayer, because he understands that he is in the presence of a holy God, and that he is unholy. His prayer is not a eulogy to his virtues; it doesn’t begin with “I.” It’s a simple confession arising out of his quest to be restored to relationship with God and with the community: *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”*

The Pharisee, as Luke tells us, *“trusted in himself that he was just.”* The English translations often render that sentence, *“trusted in himself that he was righteous,”* thus implying that his problem was what we mean when we call someone self-righteous— someone who is arrogant or holier-than-thou. But the word translated “righteous” and the word “just” and the word “justified” are the same word in the Greek text. The justification sought by both the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the justification of our lives as well, is bound up with justice. Justification and justice arise from the

same root and are inextricably linked together. Our lives are justified to the extent that we live in relationships of justice.

This is not how we usually think about justice or righteousness. In our normal way of thinking, good behavior deserves to be rewarded and bad behavior deserves to be punished. If we behave well, we're justified; if we behave badly we're not. Whether it's terrorists or drug dealers or crooked corporate accountants or pedophiles or income tax evaders, we seek to bring the offenders to justice, by which we mean punishment. In fact, we even refer to our judicial structure as the "criminal justice system," as you know if you're one of the many fans of the highly popular TV show *Law and Order*. Like the Pharisee, we "trust in ourselves that we are just," unlike those who are criminal offenders. We're realistic enough to recognize that good behavior isn't always rewarded and bad behavior isn't always punished. In an imperfect world, miscarriages of justice will happen sometimes. But it never occurs to us to question whether our notion of justice as a system of laws and rewards and punishments is the best notion or that the underlying notion of the justification for our existence is correct.

Which may explain why this parable of Jesus disturbs us the longer we stay with it. If we stay with it long enough, we might even read it as saying that God doesn't value moral goodness enough to reward it or hate criminal behavior enough to punish it—that God, in fact, may have a rather different notion of what constitutes justice, and consequently, what constitutes the justification for our lives than we do. In the scriptures, through the Old Testament prophets as well as the New Testament gospels, justice is not primarily about criminal behavior, though it includes that. Rather justice is always about relationships—relationships to God, to one's neighbor, to strangers and resident aliens, to marginalized people like widows and orphans who have little or no social standing, and even to

enemies. Justice is present to the extent that social conditions promote social relationships that result in peace and well-being and social harmony— what the Hebrew scriptures call *shalom*. Just behavior produces the fruits of *shalom*, and when we live in ways that contribute to *shalom* our lives are justified.

The tax collector, in contrast to the Pharisee, knows that his life neither manifests nor contributes to justice understood as peaceful community or *shalom*. He knows he doesn't have a leg to stand on, so to speak, and so instead trusts only in God's mercy to justify his existence. He makes no comparisons of himself to others, as the Pharisee does or as we frequently do— well, I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not as bad as so-and-so. No, he knows that if the justification of his own life is predicated on measuring up to a certain standard of behavior as both he and the Pharisee and probably most of us, too, conceive of it, his goose is cooked. So his prayer does nothing to establish his own legitimacy or to rationalize his behavior. Quite the contrary, in fact. He confesses his failure to live justly, to promote *shalom*. He simply throws himself on the mercy of the court.

And in so doing, discovers that the court is merciful. That's the real zinger in this story. It undermines our whole notion of justice— of reward and punishment, of getting our just desserts— and equates justice with mercy rather than with punishment. God's justice, Jesus is saying, is not retributive, but restorative. To be merciful is to be just. This is what the prophet Joel, in our Old Testament lesson, is trying to get at also, I think. While accepting the notion common in his time, that the plague of locusts might be a sign of divine judgment for Israel's unfaithfulness, he goes on to affirm that divine judgment or justice is not about punishing the guilty but about restoring everything to wholeness—to *shalom*. His vision is a vision of hope, of a time when all that has been destroyed both by human evil and natural disasters will be

restored to harmony and wholeness. *“I will repay you for the years the swarming locust has eaten. . . you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you.”* That’s God’s notion of justice. Justice, and hence, justification is not something we achieve; it is a gift from a merciful God, a God who, St. Paul tells us, “justifies the ungodly.” And it is given where our failure and weakness to live justly is most apparent and readily confessed.

That fact is precisely what has always made the Christian gospel a scandal and stumbling block to many people, even good moral people, including church people. Like the Pharisee, many of us want God to accept us because we lead morally upright lives, because we’re basically good people, because we’ve not done wicked things like murder or robbery like other people. We want what we’ve achieved to be the thing that justifies the meaning of our existence and brings God’s smile of approval. But God doesn’t work that way, apparently. God justifies, that is, God accepts and restores those who don’t in any way deserve divine acceptance, and who may well deserve punishment. Lives that we do not value because they don’t measure up to our standards of justice God declares precious. And that is scandalous to our notions of how God ought to behave.

I wonder what new depths of spiritual power and freedom we modern-day Pharisees might experience if we were able to grasp that mind-boggling truth. I wonder how many closed minds might be thrown open to new rays of illumination. I wonder how many cramped and limited lives might be unleashed in new creativity and new energy? I wonder how many tired and faltering social institutions could be transformed so that they became useful again? I wonder if instead of America being noted for being a nation with more of its population in prison than any other might instead become a model of a justice that seeks to restore and heal

rather than punish and destroy. I wonder if instead of fighting over tax caps and tax cuts, we might catch a vision of a just and peaceful community and commit ourselves to its realization.

Perhaps we’ll never know. Our instincts for self-justification run deep. Our need for retribution is strong. But perhaps, just perhaps, the community of those who have hitched their wagons to the Christ whose faithfulness to God is the basis of our own justification might become a model for the world around us. If we can get it right within our own fellowship, by behaving justly toward one another and honestly confessing to God and one another our failures, by caring for the excluded, by unconditional acceptance of one another despite disagreements or differences of life situation, by our willingness to risk our reputations and our security to reach out to the tax collectors and other sinners around us, then perhaps, just perhaps, we will become a sign of hope to the whole world.