

## **Selling Yourself**

Luke 18:9-14

By now you have probably learned that the parables aren't simply engaging and innocuous stories that Jesus told to teach people valuable lessons. They are traps. He sets out one of those stories like a chunk of yummy cheese to lure us in, and like little mice who just can't help themselves, we come closer and closer to Jesus to hear his great story, we sit at his feet expecting to be handed a nourishing thought, and then, SNAP! Without any warning, he's got us. Pinned to the ground. Stricken by what Jesus has just told us about ourselves.

So now we've gotten a bit smart. And a bit wary. We still come sniffing around when he starts in on one of his stories – we just can't help ourselves any time we hear those words, "Once there was a man," or a woman, or two men – but then we start to brace ourselves for the end. We know that that SNAP! is coming, and he's got us. The hated Samaritan is the good neighbor. The wealthy man dies and is dragged down to Hades.

So this time Jesus changes his tactic. He still lays out his usual trap, but this time he doesn't even get much beyond "once there were two men" before he has us. A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple to pray. You see, we know these two men. We've studied our Bibles and heard Jesus' other stories. We know that the Pharisees were the ones who tried to trap Jesus and turned him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. And we know that even though no one liked tax collectors then any better than they do now, Jesus seemed to like them; he partied with them, even called one of them to be his disciple. So if they were all right in Jesus' book, they're all right in ours, at least the ones in the Bible. After years of Sunday School and sermons, we are trained to know that it is bad to be a Pharisee, and good to be a tax collector, at least in the grand, eternal scheme of things.

And the minute we say to ourselves, I'm not like the Pharisee in this story, SNAP! We have walked right into his trap. He's got us.

What if this story was brand new to us? And what if Jesus hadn't put a tax collector in his story but, say, a drug dealer? One who lurked around our high schools and took particular delight in introducing fresh-faced, innocent kids to the world of cocaine and amphetamines and methamphetamine? Someone who was truly the scum of the earth? Not so sympathetic now, are we?

And what if, instead of a Pharisee, Jesus had stuck an elder into the story? Or a minister? Or someone who has taught Sunday School for decades upon decades? Never missed a Sunday? Sang in the choir? Tithed faithfully and even gave extra to bail the church out of financial straits time after time after time? Visited prisoners at the jail and tutored young people from public housing after school?

His little parable begins to sound a whole lot different when you put a person like that into it, doesn't it? Someone who was doing everything right. This was a 20%'er – you know how they

always say that in any organization 20% of the people do 80% of the work? That was this guy. He did all the right things. He was a lot like us.

But doing all the right things got cancelled out by wrong thinking. Maybe he didn't go around telling people what he gave, or all the things he did. He wasn't a braggart, but he knew it. He knew that he was a pretty good person, a good church-goer, a good citizen.

I want to tell you a pretty unflattering story. I'm not sure I gave a dime to the church before I met Jim. He's the one who taught me about tithing, giving 10% of our income. A number of years ago when we were just starting out, the church we attended tried a new approach at stewardship season – I think they were shooting for guilting people into giving. What they did was make a chart with the full range of pledges, and they divided it up in ranges, 0-\$500, \$500-\$1,000, on up, and then they indicated how many people gave in each of those ranges. The idea, I guess, was for you to be able to see how you 'ranked' in comparison to other people and, hopefully, motivate you to give more.

Now remember, we were just starting out and we were in a congregation full of lawyers and doctors and executives. When I saw where we fell in relation to all the others in the church, it didn't motivate me to give more, it made me smug. And more than a bit disillusioned in my fellow church-goers who clearly weren't as good a church-goer or Christian as I was, we were. We were doing the right thing, but I have a good idea that being a snotty, self-righteous giver cancelled out any sort of generosity and selflessness I might have been given credit for in God's eyes.

Maybe that's what's at the heart of this parable, the trap that Jesus has set for us. There is grave danger in being a good Christian, a good church-goer, an upright citizen of God's kingdom here on earth. Doing good, doing the right thing is the easy part. But then you get to thinking about all the things you do and what kind of person it makes you, and then you see that all those other people out there just don't measure up. *It's time for other people to step up to the plate. She's not dressed appropriately for worship. Ugh, look at that guy with all the tattoos and piercings! They need to get jobs and quit mooching off of the rest of us.*

Calvinism has a term for it: total depravity. It doesn't mean that we are completely and totally devoid of any ability to do the right thing. It means that every single thing we do is tainted with sin. Even if we do the right thing, we do it for the wrong reason or we walk away thinking about how wonderful we are for being so wonderful and generous and self-sacrificing. And we can't help but notice that other people aren't nearly so wonderful or self-sacrificing or morally upright as we are.

And maybe we are. Maybe we are more morally upright than a lot of people out there, adulterers and embezzlers and the like. Maybe we *do* give more than other people do – more of our time, more of our money, more of our compassion. We probably *are* on more solid ground ethically than bank robbers and kidnappers and such. We surely do have more money and education and bigger houses than many, many people we cross paths with each and every day.

But what Jesus is trying to tell us is that the comparison we should be making isn't with each other, it's with God. Would society say that some of us are better than others? No question. But in God's eyes we all stand in the same light, tither and drug dealer, Sunday School teacher and unwed teenage mother, nun and tattoo artist. When you stand it next to the holiness of God, sin is sin. No matter how petty or great it may look to us. No matter how much better we think we are than other people. In God's eyes we all look the same.

Jesus says something interesting towards the end of his parable. He says that the tax collector went home justified. I wonder if justification was what the Pharisee wanted from God when he went to the temple that day to pray. I don't think it was. I don't think he thinks he needed it. He seems to think he's in pretty good shape already, doesn't he? He's just trying to sell himself to God, telling God how amazing he was, maybe so that God will answer his prayers and throw a few material rewards his way.

Paul said in 1 Thessalonians that we should pray without ceasing, but I would argue that we already do. Our constant prayer is either the prayer of the tax collector, what we now refer to as the Jesus Prayer, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner; or it's the prayer of the Pharisee – thank goodness that I'm not like those other people; now here is a list of the things I need you to do for me, God. We either look at ourselves in solidarity with all those other people out there, sinners in need of God's mercy, or we go through our days judging the people around us and trying to figure out where we stand in life's great pecking order. We are either selling ourselves to God and the world, or we are perpetually on our knees, asking for God's mercy, because we know deep down that we are no better than anyone else.

So, who are you in this parable? Which character do you identify with? You don't have many good choices, do you? I think that's how Jesus meant it. We are the Pharisee. And the tax collector. We are the saints and the sinners. But here's the good news: if we admit it we will go home today justified in the eyes of God.