

Sermon for the online service, 6th March 2022

Luke 18:9-14, Jonah 3

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

“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.” (18:11-12)

“God be merciful to me, a sinner!” (18:13)

“...this man went down to his home justified, rather than the other...” (18:14)

Well, this seems to be the most clear cut passage which I have ever talked about! On one side is the Pharisee, smug and self-righteous, his faith in himself rather than in God; on the other, the tax collector, humble and penitent. We are even told that the tax collector is justified before God, and the Pharisee apparently is not. So, be humble before God, fall on his mercy, and don't rely on yourself. Amen, and thank you for listening!

Well, it's not necessarily quite as straightforward as that. There is a surprising amount of disagreement about this parable, starting at the basic level of whether we should understand the two men to have been in the Temple at a time of public prayer, or to have been there privately. I think that by looking at the prayers of the two men, the question of who made up Jesus's original audience, and also ways in which this passage connects with the book of Jonah, a slightly different picture emerges.

To start then with the Pharisee. His prayers are all me, me, me. He's thankful that he's not like other people; he's proud of his, excessive as it happens, religious observances, and his own virtue. It is right to give thanks to God, but he just seems arrogant and obnoxious. His focus on what sets him apart from others makes me very uneasy – viewing people through the prism of what apparently makes them different from us is dangerous, and that danger is something we are currently being reminded of daily. We should never forget our common humanity. Like Jonah, the Pharisee seems reluctant to allow for God's mercy being available to others.

But I think we need to be careful not to rush to judgement here. Yes, the way the Pharisee prays may seem distasteful to us, but surely we all give thanks for our good fortune. He probably sees what he is thankful for as a sign of God's blessing, and is genuinely grateful. But he is arguably missing the spirit of God's law, reluctant as he apparently is to accept the extraordinary range and depth of God's mercy and grace. We should, however, also bear in mind that this parable is not intended to attack a whole group of people; the Pharisee here is just an example, even arguably a caricature, with his excessive fasting and tithing. It is the case that we may see Pharisees as among the bad guys of the New Testament, and certainly Luke does have harsh words for them elsewhere. But he also tells us that it was Pharisees who warned Jesus that Herod Antipas wanted to kill him (13:31) and went on to write in Acts of the most famous of all Pharisees, Paul, and his heroic evangelism.

The Pharisee, then, is self-righteous, but he does also know that his good fortune is from God, and therefore offers thanks. What though of the tax collector, standing at a distance from the Pharisee, beating his breast, and not even daring to look up to heaven? If the Pharisee is like Jonah, the tax collector is more comparable to the penitent people of Nineveh. If the Pharisee represents the insiders or the elite, the tax collector represents all those who are marginalised and excluded. He has come to the Temple feeling grief and pain such that he can do no more than ask for mercy. Other words just aren't there. When something is really wrong, distressing us, pressing on us, often it is very hard to articulate that in prayer. But God always knows and understands. The tax collector's humility and repentance are therefore recognised, as Jesus says that "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." (18:14) The tax collector would not have been seen as one of the good guys by Jesus' audience, but that is exactly what the parable seem to say that he is, or has the potential to be.

However, I would just like to throw a couple of other views in for balance, although even as I'm speaking I feel a bit mean about doing so! Obviously this parable is short and to the point, but we're not given any sign that the tax collector has truly repented; he knows he's a sinner, but will things change? Can they change? We seem a long way off the sackcloth and ashes, and "[turning] from...evil ways" (Jonah 3:8) decreed in Nineveh. And he may be marginalised, but he's not turned away from the Temple, or hanging so far back that the Pharisee can't see him (which I know would stop the parable working!). Finally, there is a bit of uncertainty about the translation of 18:14: "this man went down

to his home justified *rather than* the other.” It may be that the Greek means “*more than* the other”, which would mean both men were seen as righteous in God’s eyes, even if the tax collector was more so.

The tax collector, then, does offer prayers which seem more pleasing to God than those of the Pharisee, but the parable is perhaps not such a clear cut example of self-righteousness versus humility as it at first appears to be. Who was Jesus’ original audience, who he knew would benefit from it? They are described rather specifically as “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” (18:9). Well, there is disagreement over who these people were, but I think it was the disciples, perhaps a larger group than the twelve, but still followers of Christ. In chapter 17, Jesus moves on from talking to a group of Pharisees to talking to the disciples, and it is not clear that his audience has changed. Immediately after this parable, the disciples are rebuked by Jesus for trying to stop children coming to him, and that rather fits with the idea that they saw themselves as more righteous than others, and had not appreciated Jesus’ message to them. They were more like Jonah, and the Pharisee, and less like the tax collector.

But it’s not a bad thing when the disciples made mistakes. For one thing, I always think it’s very encouraging to us to see how often they got things wrong, although they were with Jesus and being taught directly by him. Like Jonah, they are also an example to us of how it’s possible to get things right in the end, and of God’s persistence with us; “[the] word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.” (Jonah 3:1). He will give us not just a second chance, but a third, fourth, fifth, hundredth, thousandth, chance to get things right. Why does he do that? Because he is full of compassion and mercy. God showed compassion to Nineveh, not destroying it as he had threatened (at the moment, to mention the destruction of a city feels all too relevant; human mercy is not like divine). God showed compassion to all those represented by the tax collector in the parable, and to all those represented by the Pharisee too. We must follow that example, and never forget that since God does not suffer from compassion fatigue, we must not either, however exhausting that may feel. We need to understand that we all need mercy and grace, and if we understand that, it makes it easier for us to show these qualities to others as well.

As I conclude, I hope that none of us is thinking, “God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee”! The parable and Jonah both describe the extension of the kingdom to those people who might not have expected to be admitted,

and reinforce that we may well be surprised both by those who turn wholeheartedly to God, and also by those who don't. Above all, they both tell us that God's mercy is far greater than we could ever possibly comprehend, and that it is by no means up to us how he uses it. I'd like to end with a rather lovely quotation from, slightly surprisingly, John Calvin: "our faith needs no other support than this, that God has accepted us, not because we deserved it, but because he does not impute our sins."

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