

WHICH ONE?

Luke 18:9-14 [MW19-21]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 27 October 2019

The Bishop was staying with the Vicar of a country parish and suggested they go into the church to pray. At the altar the Bishop knelt, beat his breast and said, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." The Vicar thought he had better do the same so he knelt at the altar, beat his breast and said, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." The Sexton had come in to clean the church and on seeing the Bishop and the Vicar at the altar thought he better do the same. The Sexton knelt, beat his breast and said, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." The Bishop leaned towards the Vicar and whispered, "Look who thinks he's a sinner!"

One day, Jesus suddenly said to all those within earshot

- let me tell you about these two blokes who went to the temple to pray ...
the people edged closer
no one wanted to miss a word
- you can feel the anticipation in the air
perhaps one or two in the crowd are grinning with expectation
because they are sure they're going to enjoy this story

Jesus began

- two men went to the temple to pray
one was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector
- that's a bit tough
who do you identify with, who is the 'good guy' and who is the 'bad guy'?
- Pharisees were admired by the people for their public righteousness
but people seldom liked them
something to do with their condescending, disapproving nature

Tax collectors were no better

- they collaborated with a despised foreign government
they cheated their own people
they violated their ties with their people and their religious heritage every day
- however tax collectors did have one appealing 'virtue'
they were someone everyone else could look down on
everyone could say: "he's worse than I am"

So, back to the story

- the Pharisee stood up, and in the words of the NIV, "prayed about himself"
"prayed about himself"
- God I thank you that I am not like all the others ...
robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid like that tax collector down the back
- having established his credentials by comparing himself with ordinary mortals
who fall well short of the mark, the Pharisee lists his positive record:
fasting twice a week, tithing all his income

Meanwhile, down the back, in a dark corner

- the tax collector was praying
he couldn't stand still, he kept fidgeting
he wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven
- he cried out in a wavering voice
"God, have mercy on me, a sinner"

The crowd was enjoying this story

- the two men prayed just as the crowd expected they would so far it was a great story ...
- then came Jesus' closing line which stopped the crowd in their tracks it shocked them yet that should come as no surprise because Jesus' closing lines so often did that!
- make no mistake ... for the first hearers this was a shocking and deeply disturbing story

The crowd certainly would not have liked the Pharisee

- but they would have expected him to be held up as a model of piety so when Jesus said:
"Mark my words. It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who went home made right with God"
- the crowds' collective mouths dropped open you could have heard a pin drop

Jesus continued

- "If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. but if you humble yourself, you will be honoured"
- the crowd dispersed people went away shaking their heads and grumbling

One way of recapturing some of that thinking and wondering

- getting back the "stop you in your tracks" factor is to rewrite the parable for our own day

So here is my version of this parable ...

Two men went into a cathedral to pray. One was the pastor of a small rural church, the other was Brian Tamaki. The pastor of the small rural church knelt prayed: "Lord, I thank you that I am not pushy or loud or one who enjoys being in the limelight like other pastors - especially that Brian Tamaki. I am theologically open minded, I visit regularly, teach Bible in schools and drive a ten year old Toyota."

Brian Tamaki sat near the back and said: "Father God, I don't even know if I'm welcome in this building. I just ask that you would forgive me, for I have sinned and fallen short of your demands."

Jesus said, "Wouldn't you know it, Brian Tamaki was the one whose words pleased God. For those who try to tell God how good they are and how bad others are will be ignored; while those who come as they are will be blessed."

Which one do you identify more with in the parable?

- Brian Tamaki or the rural pastor? Tax collector or Pharisee?

I suspect most of us would like to picture ourselves walking away from the place of worship

- in a posture of quiet earnestness humility flowing from every pore
- I also suspect Jesus told this parable because he knew all too well that we are more in danger of the sins of the Pharisee than the sins of the tax collector
- and I further suspect Jesus told this parable because there is something of the Pharisee in each of us
- perhaps more than we might care to admit

So while it may be difficult and uncomfortable

- let's try and have a charitable look at the Pharisee
consider the Pharisee's credentials ...
- he had not committed any obvious or heinous sins
he was not dishonest or unjust
- you could happily buy a used car from him
or leave him alone with your spouse or your child
- if he lived next door he wouldn't exactly be a barrel of laughs
but he'd be no trouble either
- if everyone was like this Pharisee you could leave your doors unlocked at night
and there'd be no need for car alarms

Moreover he was admirably religious

- he attended church, gave generously, fasted regularly and with out fail
we're accustomed to seeing the Pharisee as the bad guy, or the fall guy
yet he's a more than decent citizen
- someone more or less like us ...
and while we may not have consciously prayed like this Pharisee
have you ever thought or said something like ...

Why can't people be more like me? I pay my rates, my dog is registered, my cat is neutered, my car has a current WOF. I don't abuse alcohol or drugs, I'm a contributor to society not a problem. Why can't other people be like me?

And the problem is ...

- the Pharisee wanted a set of rules to follow
while God wants truth and sincerity within
- the Pharisee tithed, he gave a tenth of his income to the church and to charity
tithing is a good thing
tithing is manageable because it's measurable
- but God raises an issue that is complicated and complex
because it can't be measured

God says: Love me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength

- the Pharisee wisely answers, "I'd rather tithe"
because when you tithe, you know when you've fulfilled your obligations
when you love, you're never really done

The same with fasting - it's a good practice

- an act of devotion to God
and it's also measurable - you give up a meal or a day of food and count it off
- when God says: "Love your neighbour"
it's an intangible commandment, there's no end to it
- fasting is easier

The Pharisee for all his earnestness and effort and devotion to God

- had grasped the wrong end of the stick
he looked at others as a way of measuring how well he was doing

Besides which the Bible does not say

- 'you ought to be as good as the next person and better than some'
the Bible commands us to strive to be like God
and in that we all fall short

Beyond all this the Pharisee did not look at his fellow human beings

- with any sort of compassion or humility
- the Pharisee did not just look down on the tax collector
- the Pharisee despised him!
- you can't make a case for loving God when you have no regard for others
- and in this respect the Pharisee was in big trouble!

In the parable it's as if the Pharisee is saying

- "How fortunate you are, Almighty One, to have me!"
- while on the other hand the tax collector prays
- "Do you see, O God, how badly I need you?"

"Do you see O God how badly I need you?"

- no frills, no pretence, straight up
- this is why the tax collector went home made right with God

At the base of it, the stumbling block for Pharisees, for good people, decent citizens

- is not that they have a 'holier than thou' attitude
- it is they have a kind of 'holier than God' attitude!
- they find it hard to leave room for the grace of God
- not only for others, but for themselves
- no grace for others, because they don't believe they deserve it
- no grace for themselves, because they don't believe they need it

It is not that God does not love the Pharisee

- God's heart pours out for the Pharisee, for all similarly 'good' people
- but the Pharisee - then and now - finds it so hard to understand or accept
- that one quality in God's nature that stands out above all others:
- Grace
- Grace

Jesus gives a tick to the tax collector because he knew he needed it, desperately

- Jesus sends the Pharisee packing because he couldn't see the need for it
- Jesus disturbs the crowd because they thought they had it figured out
- then Jesus shifted the goal posts!

Pharisee ... Tax Collector

- which one do you see yourself more in?
- which one do you pray like?
- which one do you come before God like?

[Pause]

This coming week I invite you to spend time in prayer

- with the attitude of the Tax Collector
- it might be a bit unusual, unnatural, uncomfortable
- but I encourage you to stick with it
- because I believe you will have a fresh experience of God's grace
- and it will make a difference