

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 18:9-14
“Pride: The Deadliest Of All”
(The Seven Deadly Sins Series)

February 23, 2014
(7th Sunday After Epiphany)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 18:9-14 "THE DEADLIEST OF ALL"

Only In Luke: Parable (L)

1) v.9 LUKE'S INTRODUCTION: AUDIENCE / INTENT. For Jesus, Stories Are Therapy, Invitation
v. 9 = Editors Introduction: Pharisees & Lawyers

9 And Jesus said to certain people who considered themselves **righteous** 2 Cor. 1:9, Rightly Related To God/ Faithful
and despised the others, this parable: Older Sons! 15:25-32, Scorn/Reject/Contempt, No Love, Piety/ Condescension
Jesus' Goal = See Yourself = Invitation, Healing Insight

2) vv.10-14a PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR.

Rhetorical *Syncretism*: Polar Opposites, Single Indirect Narrative

a) v.10 Two Go Up: Pharisee And Tax Collector. "A Pope & Pimp Went To St. Peter's To Pray!"

Pharisee = *separated ones*" Purity/Piety/Torah, Held In High Regard

10 "Two men **went up** to the temple to pray, Lamb Sacrifice (9am/3 pm), Lk. 1:9, 19:46, 24:53, Acts 2:46
1 one a Pharisee, Negative Portrait, 7:30, "...rejecting God's will for them."
2 and the other a tax collector. 3:12-13, First Shock! Why's He Here? Best/Worst Of Judaism, 15:1-2
Pharisee Keeps Law, Tax Collector A Traitor, Private Prayers During Incense

b) vv.11-12 The Pharisee: His Manner, His Prayer (Praying About Himself!)

On Prayer During Service, *Ben Sirach* 50:1-21

Manner 11 1) The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, Separation/ Isolation: Avoid Uncleaness
Five I's, Announces His Status Unless God Has Missed It

Content: Long 2a) 'GOD, I thank thee because He Was Different In Many Aspects, Moral Virtue, Ps. 17:3-5
I am not like other men (lit. *the rest*), Outsiders //t. Ber. 7.18, b. Ber. 28b, Preaching In His Prayer!
17:7-10, Prayer As Moral Display, Goes From Bad To Worse

Vice List 2b extortioners, = *rapacious*, 11:39, 16:14, 15, 18, Vice-List Of Three Items, Contrast
unjust (unrighteous), Vice List, Perhaps *cheats, swindlers // extortioners*
adulterers, 7:39-40, Religious Meaning = Sell Out Primary Religious Loyalty

Exemplar 2b' even like this tax collector. Becomes Judge, 4 Ezra 8:47-50, Animus 15:30, 7:34, 15:1
Mk. 2:18, Lev. 16:29-34, , 23:27-32, 25:29, Num. 39:7

12 2a' I fast twice a week. Atone For Israel? Spiritual Disciplines, 5:33, 2:37, Acts 13:2-3, 14:23
Disciplines I give tithes of *all that I acquire*.' Rev. 3:17, No Room For Gift From God; Hands Already Full!
Works Of Merit/Supererogation, U.M. Doctrine, No Debt With God!

b') v.13 Tax Collector: His Manner, His Prayer: Asks For Something.

1) Distance, 2) Eyes, 3) Beat Chest, 4) Named Self As Sinner

13 1) But the tax collector, 19:1-10, Zacchaeus
Manner standing afar off, Isolation Of Purity (Pharisee) v. Isolation Of Unworthiness
would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, Ps. 123:1, Jn. 11:41, Posture Of Humility, Utter Simplicity
but he beat upon his chest saying, 23:48, Sign Of Deep Shame/Grief Over Sin At Center

Content: Short 2) 'GOD! Agrees With Pharisees' Description Of Him As A Sinner; Ps. 51:1, 19
Self-Accused Make an atonement for me, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"
the sinner.' 17:13, Repentance/Hope Relies On Grace, Ps. 51, 24:11, 64:3, 77:38, Rom. 3:25, 4:5
Hope In God, Not Himself, What He Might Receive As A Gift

a') v.14a Two Go Down: Tax Collector And Pharisee: Divine Reversal Revealed.

Shown To Be In The Right! Sacraments Not Guarantee Right Relationship

14 I tell you, Jesus Claims To Speak For God (As God!); God Justifies, Not The Self
2' he (i.e. the tax collector) **went down** to his house made **righteous** (justified), 19:8 Shock No. 1
1' rather than that one (the Pharisee)." Two Different Visions Of God, Pharisee Now Outsider! Shock No. 2

Did He Repent/Change Jobs/Restore + 1/5th? Lev. 6:5, Num. 5:7

1') v.14b UNIVERSAL CONCLUSION: GENERAL AUDIENCE. 16:15, Verse 14b = Editorial Conclusion

Also a-b//a'-b' Syntax, N.T. Floater, 14:11, Mt. 18:4, 23:12, I Pt. 5:6

a For every one who exalts himself, Self-Promotion
b *will be* humbled, (Passive voice = in future by God) Involuntarily
b' and he who humbles himself Voluntarily
a' *will be* exalted (delivered, redeemed, lifted close to God). God-Promotion

The Pharisee Or Tax Collector's Life Are Not Examples To Be Followed

Righteous Acts Without Love Are Not Righteous, The One *Written-Off* Is Now *Written-In*

This Process Is Both Now And Later, Love Of God Turns To Self-Love = A Truly Deadly Sin, Gift Becomes Possession
To This Story You May 1) Be Offended Because True, 2) Feel Pain Because True, 3) Laugh At Yourself Because True, 4) Point To Others
Humility Is Not An Achievement But An Insight Into Who I Am And Where I Stand Before God, "I need an atonement" Is A Good Prayer

A BEGINNING ANALYSIS OF THE DEADLY SIN OF *PRIDE* = *SPIRITUAL CANCER* (* = Phil's Additions)

Bodily Location	Center of the Self, the Heart, the Command and Control Center
Synonyms	Vanity, Conceit, Hubris, Haughty, Arrogance
Brief Definition	Excessive self-love, inordinate self-esteem, divine aspirations to independence, reject God for the inflated self.
*Corruption Of Something Good *Life as	The Divine image in each, innate human worth as a gift from God Life as a stage for a play of one before admirers, living in the spotlight
Healing Virtue Blessed are *Needed Spiritual Disciplines	God himself/ Resultant Humility Mt. 5:3, "The Poor in Spirit" Worship: Recenter, Confession of Sin: Insight, Obedience: New habit
Desire for...	Something above (<i>superbia</i>), Moral independence
*Cultural Stereotype	The myth of Narcissus who fell in love with himself
Hidden forms	False humility, inability to receive a compliment with "Thank you."
Impairs a....	Sense of proper position before God and others
The Lie	Gen. 3:5, "You will be like God...." Is. 14:14, "I will make myself like the Most High...."
Biblical example	Satan & demons; Isaiah 14:13-19 is sometimes applied to the Evil One
Violation Of God's Law	Commandments 1-4: God's honor is first, then human welfare
Key verses	Prov. 16:18, Is. 2:1, Mk. 7:21-22, Heb. 3:6, Rev. 12:7-11, Is. 14:13-19, Romans 12:3, Tobit 4:4 (O.T. Apocrypha)
*You become *You lose	Blind to yourself and others Sight of God
*Hell is...	Anyone else in the spotlight, center of admiration
*Leads to...	All other sins; ignores God in place of the inflated self, its passions
*Household item	Mirror
*Theme song	Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way"
New layer of the 8 stages. (Erickson) . . . Excessive Focus On	Stage 5) Adolescence Self, Identity
*Institutional Forms Cultural Forms	Empire and Dictatorship, Atheism, Celebrity since it displaces God from the center of life
*Personal Evidence	Thinking first and only of the self and its desires Tendency to despise others by negative contrast as inferiors
*Excuse Level of Love	"I love me, don't you?" "I am superior as a person" Stuck at St. Bernard's Level 1: "Love of self for the sake of the self."
Secular Form Pathology	Self-esteem as the answer to everything! Narcissism as a character disorder, Opposite pathology = self-hatred
Sometimes confused with	Satisfaction at a job well done, Good achievements, Appropriate self-worth, Efficacy

THE DEADLIEST OF ALL

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.”

As much a law as gravity, only more so!

L U K E 1 8 : 1 4 b

A heavily booked commercial flight out of Denver was canceled. A single agent was rebooking a long line of anxious travelers. An angry man pushed to the front and slapped down his ticket, “I have to be on this flight and it has to be first class!”

“I’ll be happy to help you, but I have to take care of these folks first.”

“Do you have any idea who I am?” he demanded loudly.

Without hesitating, the agent smiled, picked up her public-address microphone and announced, “May I have your attention, please?” she broadcast throughout the terminal. “We have a passenger who does not know who he is. If anyone can help him find his identity, please come to the gate.”

As the man retreated, the crowd burst into applause.¹ The concise wisdom of Proverbs 16:18 is the result of long observation and painful experience, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” and it happens every day.

You’ve all heard of *The Seven Deadly Sins*: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Lust and Gluttony, also known as *The Capital Sins* since they are the sources and fountains from others flow in endless combination. They are an ancient diagnostic tool from the fourth century Christian monastic movement.² Our universal condition of original sin is a moral disease of the self in all its capacities. None of our faculties or functions- our flesh, our feelings, our minds, our intuition, will, emotions or memory- none are left unaffected; the disease is systemic. We are a hundred watt bulb giving off ten watts of light; we are diminished. We walk, but with a universal

¹ Steve May, *The Story File* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 246.

² On the early history and formulations, see Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009) 25-40.

limp. We crave something more, but don't know how to name it and with a rebellious heart for which the knowledge of God is no longer natural. We do much that is outwardly good, but often for the wrong reasons and with far less capacity than we were created for. We imagine a better self or world but can't get there because we are- one and all- weighed down with this inherited weight of sin and evil to which we add our own contributions, and on and on it goes across the generations, unless there is an intervention from above to break the cycle and establish a new government in the human heart- the kingdom of God where Christ dwells and rules.³

It is from this underlying spiritual illness of original sin that seven symptoms appear, and from their combinations all the ways we miss out on the satisfactions for which we were made- which is to love God totally and our neighbors as ourselves. Left to its awful power, sin corrupts and pollutes and twists and deceives and addicts and separates and destroys, and the deadly seven sins are the headwaters of a river that carries us away from God. Paul was blunt when he said, "For the wages of sin is death..."⁴ If you work for sin- and we all do, and never find a better master, then death is your wages: death with a *small d* now, Death with a *Capital D* later.

If you go-with-the-flow and slide-with-the-tide and follow the fashions of the day and the obsessions of the culture, you go against God, because the whole world is under the sway of an alternative reality, an anti-God system Jesus has come to undermine and displace. But Jesus pays his servants in abundant life, "I came that they might have life, and have it to the full" he announced in the Gospel of John.⁵ Unredeemed human nature cannot please God, and that is what we all inherit. It's why Jesus said the only solution is new life from the inside out, "You must be born anew."⁶ Only when we are awakened to our condition do we sense a need for the new life only he has the power to give.

³ The U.M. Articles of Religion, Article VII: Of Original or Birth Sin: "Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, *and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually*" (*U.M. Book of Discipline 2012: 65, ital. ad.*)

⁴ Romans 6:23.

⁵ 10:10.

⁶ John 3:3.

Luke 18:9-14 6

People are asleep in the comfort of their sin, thinking life is normal; then, if they respond to the light and tug of the Holy Spirit, at some point they will be spiritually awakened, and here a decision is made: to say Yes to the pain and promise of the awakening- and both are true, or resist the call of God and go back to sleeping in the shadows. If they say Yes, then more grace and light are offered to point them in the direction of Jesus Christ, and at some point they will either find themselves believing and following him among his disciples, or else they will be aware of how resistant they've become, and here the accountability for going back to the sweet slumbers of sin is much higher. A fresh layer of callous desensitizes the soul.

Before the tax collector came to the temple and prayed, "God! Make an atonement for me, a sinner!" something invisible had happened. Once he was blind to his true condition; now there's an awakening, a piercing of his heart that reveals to his mind what a low, wicked life he was living. He sees himself in the light of a holy God. Perhaps for the first time he saw the ugly thing he'd become- eaten up with greed and envy, a practitioner of state violence and extortion against his fellow Jews, a traitor to his people and to their merciful and just God. Only the Holy Spirit through the work of preparatory grace can offer this depth of insight, and it hurts.⁷ There is nothing else quite like pain in the soul, to know I am guilty before the eyes of the only one who finally matters, but it is also a grand invitation.

It was Evagrius Ponticus- a desert monk of the fourth century- who first cataloged and systematized a list of particular demons or destructive passions which arise from the center of the self, from the heart. His original list of eight was later reduced to seven so there would be one for each day of the week.⁸ A battle for each day- I like that! A vice to resist and a virtue to seek: humility over pride, moderation displacing gluttony, gratitude overwhelming envy, using the strength of God's grace to combat the worst that's in me. When I read Evagrius' ancient description of pride, I was struck with his insight. In his own words, now sixteen centuries ago:

"The demon of pride is the cause of the most damaging fall for the soul. For it induces the monk 1) to deny that God is his helper and 2) to

⁷ On prevenient grace and its workings on the *way of salvation*, see Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2007), 73-82; William Willimon, *This We Believe* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2010), 50-53; Ted Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2010), 111-113, 121-123.

⁸ Mary Bringle, *Despair: Sin Or Sickness* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1990), 52ff.

consider that he himself is the cause of his virtuous actions. 3) Further, he gets a big head in regard to the brethren, 4) considering them stupid because they do not have the same opinion of him."⁹

Step 1: forget God. Step 2: claim credit for the good. Steps 3 and 4: puff up with importance and despise others by thinking them not so advanced. Here is the path to pride, and we've all walked it. Whenever I end up on the high side of a comparison, this is the path. And none of the downward slide can happen unless I first forget God, so perhaps the mother of the mother of sin is amnesia! But then we have to ask, What's wrong with us that we so easily forget our Maker? Well, original sin- how we all arrive in the world- means we all have *spiritual Alzheimers*; we quickly forget God when the awareness dawns, and we all have *spiritual ADHD*, so we are easily distracted. Sin impairs cognition and perception and memory; our intellectual and moral faculties are deeply impaired. This is why God the Son came in flesh, to get close enough to command our attention with unforgettable words and deeds that rivet the attention and lay bare the heart. From our perspective at ground level we look sort of OK- not so bad as others, but how must we appear to God? Like cancer patients comparing ourselves, "My color is better than yours!"

Some early theologians speculated it was pride that caused Lucifer the archangel to fall from heaven in rebellion and to take on his demonic role as Satan the accuser. Revelation chapter 12 verse 7 is the barest hint of a high-level breach: "Now war rose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought, and they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven." The key wilderness temptation of Jesus- that he would break loyalty and divert worship to the Evil One in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world-¹⁰ helps us understand why Christian teachers saw pride, which is essentially willful independence from God, as the most devilish of all. It was this impulse that lead Adam and Eve to aspire to be like God rather than remain humble, happy, innocent creatures. "You shall move up in the world," whispered the crafty snake. "You shall be as God, knowing good and evil. You shall have independent moral judgment."¹¹ It was not to be, and think of the misery that began long ago, and

⁹ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Pratikos and Chapters On Prayer*, translated by John Bamberger (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978), 20, numbers added.

¹⁰ Luke 4:5-7 // Matthew 4:7-9.

¹¹ Genesis 3:5.

of the fresh chaos released every time we follow their path of deception and distrust, over-reaching and rebellion. The aftershocks of the initial earthquake continue in and through each of us. We are our first parents.

Now against misunderstandings, the deadly sin of pride is not satisfaction of a job well done, not joy in something of beauty created or enjoyed, not a sober sense of worth, not a sturdy sense of self. All these are remnants of the good. Pride is saying "my will" rather than "thine be done." It is the inability to sing over every good thing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow...." Pride is the arrogant independence which refuses to *look up* to God and *looks down* on others. Professor Peter Kreeft reveals why it's so deadly: "The reason God hates pride, the reason pride is so hellish, is that it keeps us from knowing God, our supreme joy."¹²

There is in us all a desire to value something supremely and adore it. Life will have a compelling center, and if it's God, then it's *worship*, and if anything else, the accurate term is *idolatry*. Pride puts self on the throne and becomes the object of its own adoration, so pride is idolatry- the worship of the self and its desires. As Bette Middler once said in the movie *Beaches*, "Enough about me. Let's talk about you. *What do you think of me?*"¹³ Funny indeed, and pure pride, not content with being one among others under the care of so great a God as ours. My father once said, "Pride wants to be the corpse at every funeral, the bride at every wedding."

There is- the psychologists tell us- an inevitable dose of this in adolescence as we engage what it means to be a self apart from their parents. Endless hours in front of a mirror, wondering *how I look*. But if this never moves beyond self-discovery to compassionate engagement with others, it hardens into conceit, into haughtiness and all toxic fruits that spring from the root of pride. When you see someone caught in pride- including yourself, know that they and you to are frozen at an adolescent stage in which self and its needs is all there is.¹⁴ To love the self for the sake of the self is

¹² *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 102.

¹³ Found at www.mooviees.com/2564/quotes.

¹⁴ On the correlation of the deadly sins with Eric Erikson's developmental stages, see Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1993), 47.

still love of a sort, but it never goes anywhere, and soon sours.¹⁵

It was just such a spiritual sickness that Jesus held up to mockery in *The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector*. Luke cues us that Jesus' target was those whose religion had gotten sick on pride, a special temptation only of serious believers. They considered themselves righteous and despised others, which is two sins: pride, and the reverse of envy. So Jesus gave them a dose of his strongest antidote, a story infused with the light of the Spirit. If they got it and were awakened, there's hope; if not, it shows how pride blinds and how deep is the blindness.

The parables of Jesus say a lot through a little. The characters are overdrawn and memorable. They have punch lines that rupture our understandings of who God is. Parables are not cute little stories to illustrate religious truths we already know; they are subversive weapons of the kingdom of God. Parables do not so much ask us to *do something* as *see something*. Until you've felt shock, anger, or bewilderment, you probably haven't understood a parable. Consider the following:

“A grocery store clerk wrote Ann Landers to complain she'd seen people buy *luxury* items- like birthday cakes and bags of shrimp- with food stamps. She went on to say people on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were 'lazy and wasteful.'

A column was soon devoted to responders. One woman wrote: 'I didn't buy a cake; I did buy a big bag of shrimp. My husband had been working at a plant for fifteen years when it shut down. The shrimp casserole was for our wedding anniversary and lasted three days.'

Another wrote: 'I'm the woman who bought the \$17.00 cake and paid with stamps. I thought the check-out woman would burn a hole through me with her eyes. The cake was for my little girl's birthday, her last. With bone cancer she'll probably be gone in six to eight months.'¹⁶

¹⁵ The four stages of love identified by Bernard of Clairvaux are another diagnostic tool for spiritual formation, and they are: 1) To love the self for the sake of the self (narcissism if it stays stuck), 2) To love God for the sake of the self (faith for its benefits only- the beginning believer), 3) To love God for the sake of God (whether benefits or no- the maturing believer), and finally 4) To love the self for the sake of God, which is where love becomes wisdom and joy as we see ourselves through God's eyes and begin to see others through the same divine lenses. It is these who are happiest.

¹⁶ PreachingToday.com search under Luke 18:9-14.

This is how the parables of Jesus work; they shock. Remember, Jesus did not come to improve our world, to make things a wee bit better; he came to replace it, and for those who are *born again*, the first signs of the new world can be seen even now!¹⁷

In *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin says to Hobbes, "I felt bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

"Maybe you should apologize," Hobbes suggests.

Calvin ponders out loud, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."¹⁸ Religion gets sick when it avoids the purging effects of confession. Religion gets sick when it goes before God with a padded resume instead of a plea for mercy.

Our story begins with an observation, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector." To feel the contrast, a modern equivalent might be, "The Pope and a pimp went into St. Peter's to pray."¹⁹

Jesus' hearers know the temple well; who's an insider, who's not. The temple is the magnificent temple of Herod in Jerusalem. All that remains are the foundation stones, the *Wailing Wall*. With each concentric structure- the outermost court of the Gentiles and women, next the court of Israel, then the Holy Place, and finally the innermost Holy of Holies- God was closer and access more restricted. Only once in a year, on Yom Kippur- the Day of Atonement, did the high priest enter the Holy of Holies. But twice daily, mornings at 9:00 and afternoons at 3:00, an atoning sacrifice was provided for the sins of the people.²⁰ The whole regimen was testimony to three beliefs: 1) God is holy, 2) Sin is serious, and 3) Forgiveness is a necessity and highly costly, as acted out in the death of an animal.

The knife flashed and the blood of a lamb without blemish gushed into a basin to be splashed on the corners of the four-horned altar that stood in the center of the

¹⁷ John 3:5, "... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, *he cannot see the kingdom of God*," but with new birth comes spiritual sight to see what God is up to.

¹⁸ "To Illustrate: Confession," *Leadership*, Summer, 1992, 47.

¹⁹ J.D. Crossan, *Raid On The Articulate* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 108.

²⁰ Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 145. Other recent treatments of the parable include Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 118-128); Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 462-476;

Court of Israel. The lamb was then cut up and burned on the altar. Quite a spectacle: the bleating of the lamb silenced by the flash of the knife, crimson blood sprayed through the air on a hyssop branch, the sound of the choir chanting psalms, the blasting of the trumpets and crashing of cymbals, a rising cloud of dense smoke ascending to heaven as the lamb was consumed by the flames.

After the public sacrifice, the priest entered the Holy Place inside the temple to burn incense.²¹ It was during this interlude that the worshipers who stood in the various courtyards offered their prayers. The curling smoke of the sacrifice was for the forgiveness of sin, and now the prayers of the people went up before the Lord with the smell of the pungent cloud of incense. It was dramatic, earthy, embodied, and engaged all the senses, twice daily. It was a public liturgy with space for private prayer. At the end of the service the priest would come out and bless them with the ineffable name of God, during which the people bowed themselves.²²

So when Jesus says "two men went up to the temple to pray" the idea is not that of dropping into church for a few minutes of private devotions to *tune into God*. They both *went up* to the temple mount to participate with the gathered congregation in the services of daily atonement. Neither believed the oft-repeated lie you could worship God just as well on the golf course or at the lake. Their private prayers were rooted in the objectivity of public worship. This is the stage for the drama, and the actors are a Pharisee and a tax collector, the very best and very worst of Judaism.

The word *Pharisee* has bad connotations after two millennia of Christian misuse, but not so then. He was the best of his time, serious about keeping the law of God. Set alongside him is a tax collector who represents the worst. Tax collectors ultimately worked for the Romans, had perpetual contact with Gentiles, and were notorious *rip-off* artists. Shyster, and traitor rolled into one. What's he doing coming to the temple? Let him first repent of his treachery, quit his job, and make full restitution plus a 20 percent penalty.²³

There were no pews in the temple. This was before the people of God sat down on the job. The posture was standing. The Pharisee separates himself from the

²¹ See Zechariah in Luke 1:9.

²² Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 154.

²³ Precisely what Zacchaeus did and what Jesus praised in 19:1-10.

congregation; he stands aloof and probably forward, *by himself* notes Jesus. He's superior to the mob and will not risk defilement by brushing clothes with any who contacted Gentiles.²⁴ Before he speaks, his posture and placement speak volumes.

Jewish practice was to pray aloud during the offering of incense. Listen to the Pharisee's prayer. It's not so much a prayer as a sermon to the crowd. After all, "They have little chance to get a good look at a truly 'righteous' man like himself, and he is 'graciously' offering them a few words of judgment along with some instruction in righteousness."²⁵ Can you feel Jesus' sarcasm as he reports the unctuous prayer of our self-assured religious achiever? "God, I thank thee because I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all I acquire."

The fact is, however, that his prayer was true. He wasn't like those he listed. He'd have made a great church member. Honest in business, faithful to his wife, practicing spiritual disciplines for his body and budget. But what's wrong with his prayer and the heart behind it? It's bad taste and even worse theology. Here he stands at the liturgy of atonement, which is *for sin-* the blood of the lamb dripping off the altar, and he trots out his credentials to impress God and the crowd. "Little Jack Horner sat in a corner, eating his Christmas pie. He stuck in his thumb, and pulled out a plumb, and said '*What a good boy am I!*'" He's the best of his day, but with *no sense of need*. He asks for nothing, needs nothing. Prayer for him was not a window into God but a mirror to look at himself. No petitions, only self-congratulation and ugly comparisons, *the deadly sin of pride*, and he hasn't a clue! Pride blinds. With this portrait before us, who can doubt that religion can get sick? Two primary symptoms are pride and prejudice. David Rhodes says of pride:

"Pride is the dandelion of the soul. Its root goes deep; only a little left behind sprouts again. Its seeds lodge in the tiniest encouraging cracks. And it flourishes in good soil: *The danger of pride is that it feeds on goodness.*"²⁶

A second symptom is prejudice, that my religion separates me from people,

²⁴ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 148.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ "To Illustrate: Pride," *Leadership*, Fall 1986, 42.

particularly from those who are on my *sin* list. Like it or not, many outside the church see us Christians this way, as those who look down their noses. Many of them carry crushing loads of sin and guilt for which we have the cure. God save us from being a bunch of Pharisees, and yet this is one of the inherent dangers of taking Christian discipleship seriously. In our earnest desire to live a good life we mistake the results of God's grace for our own accomplishments. "I am a good man. I am not like others. I experience spiritual gifts. I am faithful. I am an insider. I pray and read my Bible. I tithe. Look what a good Christian I am." It may all be true, but as soon as we think this way, we find ourselves standing with the Pharisee whom Jesus viciously mocked. Such is the deception of which the human heart is capable. The Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us, To see ourselves as others see us,"²⁷ and beyond that to see ourselves as Christ sees us. Religion that puffs up the self with pride and superiority is sick. Fasting was only required once a year, yet this man says, "I fast twice a week, and I tithe- not just what I produce- but everything that comes into my house since the man I bought it from probably forgot to pay his tithe on it. Aren't you impressed, God, so add a few points to my tally!"

Here the parable takes a turn. The tax collector is the opposite of the Pharisee. He does not stand ahead of the crowd but behind and apart from it in shame. He does not lift his eyes in prayer as was the custom but keeps them down; in a gesture of profound grief he pounds his fists over his heart because he knows where the problem is. His prayer is short and desperate, "God! Make an atonement for me, a sinner. May the blood of the lamb be for me. I have nothing good to present. Have mercy." The Pharisee thanked God that he was not a sinner. He had no need of a blood atonement. He underestimated the deceptive power of sin in his own heart. The tax collector knew differently. He needed something to wash him clean.

In 1818, Ignaz Semmelweis was born into a world of dying women. The finest hospitals lost one of six young mothers to *childbed fever*. A doctor's daily routine began in the dissecting room with autopsies, and from there to the hospital to examine expectant mothers without ever pausing to wash hands. Dr. Semmelweis was the first to associate such practices with the resultant infection and death. His practice was to wash with a chlorine solution; after eleven years and the delivery of 8,537 babies, he lost only 184- one in fifty.

Semmelweis spent his life debating his colleagues. He once argued, "puerperal fever is caused by decomposed material conveyed to a wound. I am asking you only

²⁷ Albert Wells, editor, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 180.

to wash. For God's sake, wash your hands!" Virtually no one believed him. Doctors and mid-wives had been delivering babies for thousands of years without washing, and no outspoken Hungarian was going to change them now! Semmelweis died insane at the age of 47, his colleagues laughing, and the death rattle of a thousand women ringing in his ears.²⁸

"Wash me," was the anguished cry of King David after Nathan exposed his adultery with Bathsheba. "Wash in the Jordan!" was the message of John the Baptist. "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me," said the towel draped Jesus to the pride-filled Peter. "Wash me," cried the tax collector in the temple courtyard. That is the one prayer God always answers. He has provided for it in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ once for the sins of the whole world. Sometimes we sing in question and answer the same theology:

Question: "What can wash away my sin?"
Answer: "Nothing but the blood of Jesus."
Question: "What can make me whole again?"
Answer: "Nothing but the blood of Jesus."
Conclusion: "O precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow, no other fount I know; nothing but the blood of Jesus."²⁹

The Pharisee wanted applause from above; the tax collector longed for cleansing and forgiveness. The one full, the other empty; one proud, the other humble. One focused on himself, the other on God. They, in fact, were not only different men, they believed in different gods. Who is God? Who is the God of Jesus? One who waits for us to present our good works and then rewards us accordingly? Or is God the one who delights in showing mercy to the broken and sinful? The irony is that the one who told the story himself became the sacrifice.

Thus far we have a setting- the temple, two characters- a Pharisee and a tax collector, and two speeches- one a sermon, the other a prayer for mercy. And in verse 14 we have Jesus' punch line which answers the question, Which one of these Jews

²⁸ "To Illustrate: Salvation," *Leadership*, Summer 1988, 38.

²⁹ *The U.M. Hymnal*, No. 362, Stanza 1.

is rightly related to God?³⁰ Here Jesus demonstrates his characteristic boldness of claiming to know the mind of God. "I tell you, the tax collector went down to his house made righteous, rather than that the Pharisee."

Wait a minute! The tax collector hasn't repented yet. He hasn't given up his sinful occupation and paid back all the folk he ripped off over the years. No, that may come later, but as of now he's just started out on the path to a new life. He's been awakened; he's presented himself before God's sacrifice and begged that it apply to him. Jesus has pronounced the verdict, "This man is now rightly aligned with God." Everything is moving in the right direction. Grace and mercy come first. He is now rightly aligned with the stunning grace of God and poised for that same grace to transform life at all levels. It takes time to work out the implications.

Whatever happens after conversion, whatever good works, new life, and spiritual disciplines flow from it are due to God's continuing grace. As soon as we think of them as our achievements, we stand with the Pharisee and will soon be punctured by the pin-prick of Jesus till we are willing again to stand with the tax collector and all other sinners before the self-sacrifice of Jesus and of all the millions of slain lambs that pointed ahead to him. We are not good people of pristine purity, any of us. Maybe not so bad as others- not extortioners, the unjust, or adulterers- as the Pharisee listed, but then God doesn't grade on the curve. Only in laying our lives alongside that of Jesus do we see how desperately we need the mercy of God.

This is the meaning of the generalizing conclusion in verse 14, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." That is a process that never ends and will one day be finalized at the Last Judgment where the fates of all will be fixed. Whenever we forget our debt to God and begin to tally our pious accomplishments, God is duty-bound to mock and expose us just as Jesus did this Pharisee. Why? Because God is committed to the vindication of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus as the only way for sinners to be restored. Anyone who trots out their credentials on any other basis is going to get squashed! God is committed to saving us to the uttermost, but not if we seek to save ourselves by preserving our

³⁰ The distinction between a *bounded set* and a *centered set* is helpful here. To be within a bounded set is to be within the marked borders, say a circle; to be in a centered set is to face the center from whatever distance. The Pharisee imagines a bounded set and demonstrates that he is an insider, but God's mercy is a centered set. The Pharisee is pointed in the wrong direction and unaware of his need; the tax collector is rightly oriented and keenly aware of his need for atonement. Merciful love is God's heart.

self-sufficiency. If we stand with the tax collector, there's mercy. If we stand with the Pharisee, only judgment. It is this reason that pride is the deadliest of the seven, the most toxic, the plutonium of the soul. It keeps us from the mercy we most need.

In his novel *The Testament*, John Grisham paints a portrait of one man's surrender. Nate O'Reilly is a disgraced corporate attorney plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. After two marriages, four detox programs, and a serious bout with dengue fever, Nate acknowledges his need. Grisham describes the transformation:

“... he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. ‘I'm sorry,’ he whispered, ‘Please, help me.’”

As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.³¹

This is what happened to the tax man. C.S. Lewis was right, “When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less.”³²

This parable is not an example story of who to imitate. You don't want to imitate the past life of the tax collector or the present life of the Pharisee- both of which are deadly in different ways. And the plain fact is that you can't imitate the tax collector in his repentance unless the Holy Spirit utterly breaks your heart. Don't seek humility directly; you can't. It will evade you, and as soon as you think you have it, you don't! Ask instead for the deep truth of your life to be revealed, ask that your faith be in Christ alone, not in anything you bring to the table, then humility will follow and pride will take a beating, and you will be more useful to Christ and his kingdom. So may the Holy Spirit give us light! Jesus is the friend of sinners. If God has ripped into your heart today with his light, don't leave without doing something about it. Don't lay down another layer of callous across your heart.

³¹ John Grisham, *The Testament* (New York: Random House, 1999), 374.

³² PreachingToday.com search under Luke 18:9-14.
