

## A Parable of Pride and Despair

Luke 18:9-14: Here is the parable that he told. It was aimed at those who were sure of their goodness and looked down on everyone else. 'Two men went to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood up and prayed thus: "I thank Thee, O God, that I am not like the rest of men, greedy, dishonest, and adulterers; or, for that matter, like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all that I get." But the other kept his distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat upon his breast saying, "O God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am." It was this man I tell you and not the other who went home acquitted of his sins.'

### I. Introduction

- A. It is a simple story, simply told, a little narrative compressed into the fewest words. Out of the lives of two men Jesus rescues a tiny fragment, an episode of fewer than fifteen minutes. Without any introduction, without visualizing description or psychological analysis or moral comment, it runs its course to the end. Here we observe again, as in all the parables of Jesus, a remarkable restraint and reserve. He leaves so many things unsaid. One has only to think of how a modern teller of stories would recount the incident? Everywhere we come upon unspoken implications; every man who listens to his words can supply what is omitted for himself, and I suspect that this is the reason that the parable continues to haunt us. It continues with us because we see ourselves involved in what Jesus is telling us. He comes to us with his words, we meet him in the place where he is addressing us, we inevitably enter into his dialogue with us.
- B. One man was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. That is the gulf which separates them. One respected, the other despised. One a leader in the community, the other an outcast and scoundrel. One a man who observed all the proprieties, the other a government official who knew how to fleece excessive taxes from his fellow countrymen. Like the men

and women in Thornton Wilder's novel who were caught on the bridge of San Luis Rey one October afternoon at three in the afternoon in 1869, the two men enter the same Temple at the same time to say their prayers and then return home.

- C. Of course it is easy to make the Pharisee the villain of the piece, indeed too easy. It has long been the fashion to condemn the Pharisee as a hypocrite. That is what the word Pharisee has come to mean. But it was the Pharisee, more than any other, who was responsible for preserving the great religious tradition of which we are a part. He was the custodian of divine revelation. It is not simply a conflict between right and wrong that we have here or between a good man and an evil man. The facts are far more complicated as they always are in life. The Pharisee was a good man, certainly a good man by all the conventional standards of his time and ours. He was highly respected by the members of the Jerusalem community. He knew his Bible, at least on one level. He could quote chapter and verse. He went far beyond all that was required of him. Instead of fasting once a week, he fasted twice; instead of offering tithes on all the prescribed goods, he gave tithes on everything he possessed. He knew the virtues from A to Z, and observed them. He knew the vices, and shunned them. He was probably chairman of the Jerusalem branch of the Society for the Purity of the Faith (SPOF). . . What we see in this parable, then, is a conflict not between a good man and a bad man, but between a man who trusts in his goodness and a man who knows he is not good. It is a parable of pride and despair. Both men go to the Temple to pray.

## II. The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

A. Now if prayer means anything at all, then it is the place where we are sincere. There the secrets of the heart are exposed to Him unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known. There we reveal ourselves as we really are, as we dare not expose ourselves to any other. There we see that we are not what we ought to be. We confess that we have done things that we ought not to have done. There we place ourselves consciously in the presence of the Holy One with whom we have to do.

B. The Pharisee goes to the Temple to pray.

1. He begins well: I thank Thee. That is the way we should begin our prayers. All prayers should open with praise and thanksgiving and adoration. We begin with the great hallelujahs. We do not think of ourselves first, but of God, and in His presence we rejoice because of all that He is for us. We forget ourselves. So we are liberated from our self-centeredness: we unlock the gates of our imprisoned selves. We raise the soul's windows and open the doors into which he may enter. For a moment at least we are our truest selves: we are creatures exalting our Creator. We are realizing why we were born.
2. But now, alas, we receive something of a jolt. The Pharisee continues: I thank Thee that I am not like other men, greedy, dishonest, adulterous. We had thought that he would say Thou so that he might thank God for being God and being all that He is. He thanks God that he is not like other men. Yet we must not be too quick to judge him. To him other men were going the way of the world. He looked at the tax-gatherer, and was glad that he wasn't that kind of person. Of course none of

us ever says so outright; we only live so and think so. Like the Pharisee, we see to it that we are properly separated.

1. The Pharisee is by no means unique. These separatist groups are constantly springing up within Protestantism. We recognize them in the many splinter groups which are constantly breaking away.
2. We see them, too, in the perennial tendency of Protestants to become a middle-class group, the respectable class to which we belong, the right kind of people. How many flourishing congregations have mushroomed in suburban areas during the past three decades - from New York to San Francisco and Los Angeles, which are little more than congenial social clubs. In comparison with many of these essentially secular groups, tinged with the pastel shades of religiosity, the Pharisee stands up pretty well.

C. What is it, then, that we disapprove in him?

1. Well, for one thing he is uninteresting. There is nothing so boring as to hear a man talking about himself all the time, and little so disturbing as to hear a man dispensing commonplace formulae to God. The truth is that the Pharisee is not thinking about God at all; he is thinking about himself. One reason that Jesus can repeat his words is that there isn't anything really private about them at all. Jesus is not invading the intimacy of his conversation with God because there isn't any real intimacy there at all and no real honesty.
2. The indictment of this kind of praying is given to us in the words of Isaiah to king Ahaz, who also appeals to his own piety: "Is it too little for you to weary men that you weary God too?"

That kind of prayer and religion is boring, and all of us have known something of the sheer boredom of religion. The God of the Bible is aware of this: "O my people, wherein have I wearied Thee? Answer me."

3. But there is another reason why we disapprove of the Pharisee. He is too much bound up with traditional orthodoxy. He does not venture beyond the ranges of his little provincial bailiwick. He moves in a closed circle of those who think as he does. His prayer lacks passion. There is no urgency in it, no cry of sorrow, no contrition, no plea for forgiveness. The Pharisee, like his modern counterpart, is not adventurous. He cultivates a cloistered piety. He quotes the tradition and sticks to the rules and conventions. He repeats formulae. He is a stereotype. He has no agony or suffering, no sense of guilt, and so there is no victory inside, no singing in his heart.

(4. It is not only in the church that we find him. Take the student who masters the textbook, repeats the professor's words, agrees with everything that he says. Chances are that he will get a straight 'A', which in itself may be all right. But then there is that other student who is asking, "What does this really mean?" or "I can't understand what you are saying," or "Is that true?" or "What difference does it make?" He may be confused, but I think he has the better mind. At least he is more interesting.)

D. But what about the tax gatherer: Perhaps we can dispose of him right away.

1. He is a bad man. You would have no difficulty laying out the bill of particulars against him. But that is not the point of

the parable Jesus is giving us. There is another kind of righteousness, and that's where things become complicated. We all disapprove of the man and all his ways. But he becomes tolerable for us when we see him facing himself. We turn to him and become interested in him at the point where he knows his frailty and sin, where he makes no claims for himself at all. This man knows himself, and the Pharisee does not.

2. So he comes to say his prayers. There we see him crouching in the shadows, far from the burning fires of the altar and the Ultimate Mystery and Perfection of the Holy of Holies, which he dare not approach. He will not lift his eyes because he knows there is darkness in him. He can only beat his breast in the torment of his sense of guilt. "O God, be merciful to me, that I am a sinner!"
3. He does not detail his sins, and if he had Jesus would not have repeated them. Moreover, they would not have told the true story. His despair is greater than his awareness that he has violated all the laws and regulations or even disobeyed the will of God in this and that a thousand times. He comes empty-handed and helpless. He does not appeal to all kinds of extenuating circumstances which might well account for all that he has done. After all, a man has to live. He does not say to God, "To know all is to understand all" or "to understand all is to forgive all," and therefore I ought to be forgiven.
4. He asks for mercy not because of anything he can suggest or plead, but in spite of. He appeals to God's nevertheless. Just as I am . . .

E. It is commonly known that in every performance of Eugene O'Neil's Long Day's Journey into Night many people leave early, sometimes after the first curtain. The hostility and guilt, the rage and the fury, the shocking language and all the storming is too much for them to bear. But this is to misunderstand what is going on. For there is an undercurrent flowing throughout it all: of great travail and suffering, of sorrow and deep longing for what might have been. The drug addict who might have been the mother she wanted to be. The miser and alcoholic who might have achieved some kind of stature as a man and father. The boy drowned in debauchery who might have been a man. The consumptive shackled and corrupted who dreamed of far horizons. But beneath it all there is a concern, terrible concern and compassion, and a love which seeks desperately to reach across the vast abyss which separate the members of this family from each other. They that are whole, said Jesus, have no need of a physician. I came to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance. It was the man who knew how much he needed forgiveness who went home justified, and I suspect he felt a sense of being cleaner inside. He returned home free, free in the freedom of God, free in the freedom that comes when we accept God's forgiveness.

### III. Conclusion:

A. But what about ourselves. What about you this morning? We have been listening together to a simple story, simply told. It was spoken by Jesus now so far away and long ago. He gave men words for their hearing. And the words were spoken loud again this morning. What do you think of this story? Do you find yourselves in any way involved in it? Are you trying to save yourself? Or has a door been opened

through which you may walk because One has opened it for you, the door of repentance and forgiveness which leads to freedom and carefreeness and running laughter.

- B. The God before whom we all live our lives in all our need is not only the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, who dwells in a high and holy place, but also One who comes to dwell with him who is of a humble and contrite spirit. And he who comes to us humbles himself in great humility in Jesus Christ, who told a story about two men who went to the Temple to pray, and one of them went home a free man, free in the forgiveness of God.

Prayer:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me,  
Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.  
O Lord, open Thou my lips,  
and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.