

The Right Stuff

Luke 18:9-14

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

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Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, the period of six weeks that prepares us for our celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter. Lent is a time for self-examination, confession, and doing whatever we can to open ourselves to a deeper relationship with God. To help with this, we have prepared a Lenten devotional booklet which contains daily Bible readings, a brief prayer and a question to ponder and reflect on. For each of the six weeks of Lent, Lee and I have chosen a theme for that week and centered the daily scripture readings and prayers around that theme. On the Sunday that falls in that week, we will be preaching on that aspect of Lenten discipline and what we can do to prepare ourselves to celebrate with joy Christ's resurrection.

The theme for this week's readings...and for today's sermon...is "Confession and Repentance." And today's scripture is a parable that Jesus told.

Luke 18:9-14

I'm sure that those of you who are my age and older can remember back to the 60's and the early days of the American space program. The whole thing of sending a man into space was an exciting...and scary...thing. I can remember watching those rockets sitting there on the launch pad getting ready to hurtle into space, and wondering if they would get back safely. And choosing those first astronauts was a challenge. Not just anybody could be that first person to orbit around the earth; it would take a very special person, a person with just the right qualities. And when the names of those first seven American astronauts were announced, it was big news: Alan Shepherd, Gus Grissom, John Glenn and the rest.

When Tom Wolfe wrote his book about these first seven astronauts, he called it *The Right Stuff*. That term, "the right stuff", was coined to describe the special qualities that a person had to have to undertake this challenge. Of course, there was a physical dimension to "the right stuff": some people were weeded out because their eyesight was not good enough or because their blood pressure rose too fast. But mainly "the right stuff" referred to the inner qualities that a person had to have— self-confidence, but not risky arrogance, courage, coolness under duress. At every level of training, more and more people were eliminated because they just didn't have "the right stuff."

I've often thought about that concept of "the right stuff" and wondered if it might also apply to other areas of life as well. Are there not certain qualities that make up the right stuff in other fields of endeavor? What about the right stuff to be a school teacher...or the right stuff to be an attorney...or the right stuff to run a business? Or what about the right stuff to be a Christian? Is there such a thing as Christian "right stuff"?

Perhaps that is what Jesus is describing in this Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Of the two characters in this parable, one seems to have all the right stuff and the other seems to have no stuff at all.

The parable is set in the Temple where these two men have come to pray. One worshipper is a Pharisee. By anybody's standards, he had all the religious right stuff. He didn't do those things that most people called sins: he wasn't greedy or dishonest or a murderer. And even more, he was a man of extraordinary dedication—he tithed of everything he had, even things that the law did not require. He fasted two days every week, even though the law only required for a person to fast one day a year. Frankly he was the kind of person that every preacher hopes for in a church member. He had all the right stuff. Except for one thing: he knew that he had all the right stuff. He was so proud of his virtue that he felt that he had the right to look down on those who were not as religious as he.

He felt particularly justified in looking down on someone as despicable as this tax collector. That was the other worshipper who was in the Temple that day. If the Pharisee was on one end of the religious spectrum, the tax collector was on the other end. Being a tax collector in that day was not what you would call honorable work. For one thing, you worked for the Romans, and that meant that you were in league with the enemy, the hated Roman oppressors. It meant that you made your living by taking from your own people and giving it to the foreign occupiers.

For another thing, the job of tax collector offered easy opportunities for graft, and most tax collectors weren't above skimming off a little extra for themselves. If they could gouge the people for more than the required amount of tax, well, so much the better for the tax collectors. So tax collectors were always looked on in low regard. Yes, I guess if you could say that preachers would love to have a congregation full of Pharisees, you could also say that they'd just as soon the tax collectors stay home.

There's no comparison between the religious dedication of the Pharisee and the lack of it by the tax collector. If Jesus had put it to a vote as to which of these two men had the right stuff to be justified before God, there would have been no question that the Pharisee would have won.

But Jesus didn't put it to a vote because he saw things differently. When Jesus gets to the end of the parable, the people's mouths drop open when they hear Jesus say that it is the tax collector, the low-life sinner with no stuff, who is justified in God's sight. How could this possibly be? It is because being justified before God has nothing to do with what we DO. The Pharisee was all about himself and all the good things he did. What this tax collector knew about himself was that he brought nothing to the table except his own neediness. He had done nothing to merit God's favor. He knelt before God painfully aware of his sinfulness and his need for God's mercy.

And there can be no doubt that this is where a faithful relationship with God begins—with our admitting that we are sinners, in need of God's saving grace.

Now an interesting thing has happened to this parable through the years. As we said, when Jesus first told the parable, the people assumed that it would be the Pharisee who would be the hero of the story. But now when we hear the story, we know that it is going to be the tax collector who is justified. Just as the Pharisees looked down on the sinfulness of the tax collector, now we look down on the self-righteousness of the Pharisee. What has happened in our hearing of this story is that we have begun to celebrate the "stuff" of the tax collector.

A Sunday School teacher was teaching the lesson on this parable to her children's Sunday School class. She described how self-righteous the Pharisee was and how humble

the tax collector was. And she concluded her class with the prayer, “Lord, we thank you that we are not like this Pharisee.” It’s the prayer of the Pharisee all over again, just substituting a different set of virtues.

You can see how that also misses the point that Jesus was teaching. It’s not about us and what we DO. Being justified before God is solely because of Jesus and what he has done for us. Clearly, that is the point of this parable: we are not saved, not justified, by what we do, but by what Jesus has done for us.

But I have had an interesting thing happen to me this week as I have read and re-read this parable. After about the fifth time I read it, I wanted to say to the tax collector, “OK, we get it; you are a sinner. Now get up and move on.” When it comes to being justified before God, it is not about us and what we do. But when it comes to living the Christian life, there is much that we are called to do. There is more to being a faithful Christian than simply beating your breast and saying, “Lord, have mercy.” That is the crucial first step, but it’s not the only step. We begin this season of Lent focusing on our need to confess our sins and seek God’s forgiveness—just like that tax collector did. But that’s not where we end it.

When someone joins the church and makes a profession of faith, that person begins by admitting his or her own sinfulness and unworthiness to receive God’s grace. In the posture of the tax collector, they admit their unworthiness and their need of Christ’s saving grace. But then they affirm that there is more to Christian discipleship—they say that they will endeavor to live the Christian life, that they will support and participate in the worship and work of the church. To support and participate in the church means to tithe and fast and pray—the things that a good Pharisee would do.

Genuine Christian discipleship begins and is permeated throughout by an awareness of our sinfulness and our need for God’s saving grace. But then rather than letting ourselves be crippled or immobilized by our failures, we accept God’s forgiveness and allow that forgiveness to change us, to enable us to move forward, to grow in our faith and service to God, to dedicate our lives to follow where God is calling us to go...to give of ourselves, to serve others.

As I read this parable, I hear both good news and challenge. The good news is that even we can kneel before God, confess our sins and receive God’s gracious forgiveness: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” There’s good news here.

But there’s also challenge here. It is the challenge to accept God’s gracious mercy, to rise from our knees and walk forth from this place as forgiven Christians, ready and willing to do God’s work.

Prayer: Lord God, we kneel before you because we are unworthy to stand in your presence. We acknowledge our sinfulness and our need for your grace. In your great mercy, save us. And give us clean hearts, eager hands, willing feet to go forth with the good news of Jesus into all the world. Let us live every day as you would have us live. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen. ✠