# Humble Yourself!

Sermon preached by Rev. Chuck Cole 10/27/2019

# Luke 18:9-14 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

If you were listening to the Children’s sermon you heard a summary of the story “Yertle the Turtle” by Dr. Seuss. Dr. Seuss said that Yertle the Turtle was representative of Adolph Hitler. Hitler of course craved power, greatness and respect and he built his power on the backs of others by debasing them and exalting himself. Nazi ideology was basically racial self-exaltation at others expense writ large. For Hitler like for Yertle it worked for a time but ultimately it was a terrible foundation and it all came crashing down. Yertle the Turtle ends up worse off than he was before his grand exercise in self-exaltation. The King of the happy Pond becomes instead the King of the Mud alone for that is all he could see.

Dr. Seuss was according to the end of the story making a clear statement of the importance of human freedom and the individual. Yertle is still a clear warning related to the personal destruction that self-exaltation reeks.

As I reflected on our parable this morning I see a similarity between Yertle the Turtle and the Pharisee in our parable.

Yertle suffers from a kind of delusion. He thinks that because in the pond he rules all he sees that if he climbs higher and sees more he will also rule all that which he sees outside of the pond. This is ridiculous. He does not rule the cows in the nearby field, the house and the people in it, the birds, the trees, the mountain or the sun just because he sees them by standing on the other turtle’s backs.

Our Pharisee suffers a similar delusion. He thinks that since he is more law abiding than thieves, rogues, adulterers and even fairly good tax collectors that he is, justified or in right relationship with God. Just like Yertle thinks erroneously the Pharisee thinks he is making himself right with God by climbing higher on the backs of others. In fact he is distancing himself actually getting farther away.

Think of it this way. Imagine all of us are stuck in a 1000 foot deep trench with perfectly smooth sides no friction, no hand holds it is impossible to scale and climb out. At the top of the pit is all we were intended to be. Let’s say somehow I came across this ladder and I climb up it and then I pray “Thank you God that I am not like those people down there at the bottom of the pit.”

What is the problem here?

I may be a little closer to the top, but I am just as stuck in the pit.

Then imagine there is a huge hand that comes down and pulls people out of the pit and reunites them with the one who loves them at the top of the pit. It reaches down into this area where you have to admit you are stuck in the pit and cannot get out. You have to be willing to admit your need, your inability and ask the hand for help.

The person on the ladder looking down on everyone else is actually farther away from what he is seeking than the people he is contemptuous of.

Imagine a person on the ladder looking at those asking for help and saying well at least I am higher than them.

That is idiotic. But that is the man in the parable. The way out of the pit of sin and brokenness that we experience as human beings is not to try to exalt yourself at the expense of others, but to humble yourselves before God.

Those that exalt themselves will be humbled, but those that humble themselves will be exalted say our verses.

The tax collector on the other hand is not deluded at all. He is fully aware of his sin and of his need and is not comparing himself to others. He knows enough not to be so foolish. There are people he could have looked down on, there are people he could step on to lift himself up, and at least he comes to the temple asking God for mercy. But he doesn’t care how he stacks up against them, he knows he is distant from God, he knows his sin hurts God, and he wants to be right, so he asks God to have mercy on him a sinner.

Jesus says the tax collector went home Justified, forgiven and right with God, not the man who exalted himself.

Let us flee from self-exaltation and humble ourselves instead. Self-exaltation especially by comparison is profoundly destructive it moves us even farther away from where we want to be.

Instead let us humble ourselves by imitating the example of humbleness the Lord gives us in this parable.

In the Eastern Orthodox Tradition there is a simple prayer that is commonly prayed which if taken to heart is a powerful tonic too self-righteousness or self-exaltation and it comes from the lips of the tax collector in this parable.

It is a simple breath prayer.

Lord, Jesus have Mercy on me a Sinner

Notice there is no room for comparison or degree or excuse. It is a simple acknowledgement of reality.

It is also if truly meant a tonic to one of the plagues of our age which is contempt.

Sarah has been reading over the last year The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard. It is so rich that she can only read a small bit at a time and then she needs to ponder it. Recently she has been pondering contempt as Willard sees contempt as one of the spiritual diseases of our age.

The amount of contempt there is in our world is appalling and we swim in it. We see it in popular culture, political discourse, on the radio, in homes and it clings to us. We need to be ruthless in dealing with contempt one way to do that is to recognize our own sinfulness and our own need.

If you are tempted to be contemptuous thinking that another human being is not worthy of your consideration, worthless or worthy of scorn pray this breath prayer.

Pray - Lord, Jesus Have Mercy on Me a Sinner. (Own it) - You may need to say it a few times.

I would suggest it is hard to humble yourself and hold contempt for another in your heart. Because the two are fundamental opposites and he will heal you of your arrogance that is the root of the contempt. If your contempt is about something lesser like talent or ability humility in a greater area should swish it as its importance fades. If your contempt is moral as you remember your own sin it should fade.

As you pray truly confessing your own sin to God and hear and hold onto

# 1 John 1:8-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

As we confess our sin and our need God will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Remember God’s Grace and be thankful and that will draw us to him and away from contempt and comparison.

He will make us right with him and right in ourselves. If we exalt ourselves compared to others we deny ourselves this blessing.

Another simple prayer to pray is

Lord Jesus Help my unbelief - which comes from the mouth of a Father seeking the healing of his son in the gospel. It is an honest and clear declaration of need in terms of faith.

Just as he responds to a confession of Sin cleansing from unrighteousness, God will respond to this call with strengthening. He will not withhold what we need to believe. This will enable us to humble ourselves because self-exaltation is often a way of making us feel better by making us feel stronger relative to others but that is another delusion. We are no stronger in faith because another is weaker.

Kind of like myself in my second year of seminary. I went to a seminary with lots of students of Northern European extraction so I was slightly below average stature. I lived thought in a triple suite with two guys who were maybe five feet tall. I feel like a giant in my room. But I was not any taller when I left my room. To rate my height based on comparison would be absurd.

I feel a desire to be fair to the Pharisee. The Pharisee begins well - Thank you God - if he had just stopped there he might be in the right direction. A heart of gratitude for what God has done in us is good and helps breed humility because a grateful heart is a humble heart. As you give thanks you remember what you have been healed from. Practice gratitude for Christ’s gift of himself and for what God has done in your heart recognizing that it is all him. The Pharisee would seem to think that he can take some credit for it.

Let us follow the example of the tax collector in our parable this morning and humble ourselves before the Lord and he will exalt us. Amen.