

## **Character: Pharisee, Tax Collector**

October 23, 2016

### Luke 18: 9-14

*<sup>9</sup> Jesus told a story to some people who thought they were better than others and who looked down on everyone else: <sup>10</sup> Two men went into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood over by himself and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not greedy, dishonest, and unfaithful in marriage like other people. And I am really glad that I am not like that tax collector over there. <sup>12</sup> I go without eating for two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all I earn."*

*<sup>13</sup> The tax collector stood off at a distance and did not think he was good enough even to look up toward heaven. He was so sorry for what he had done that he pounded his chest and prayed, "God, have pity on me! I am such a sinner."*

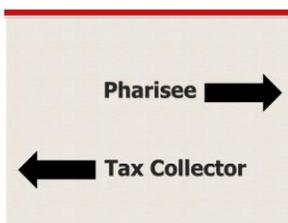
*<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus said, "When the two men went home, it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who was pleasing to God. If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honored."*



Over past two weeks we have been developing the idea of our faith story. Two weeks ago we looked at times when we were separated from God and recalled what it felt like to be brought back into relationship with God. This is part of our faith story. Last week we talked about our prayer experiences, both those times where God answered our prayers and when God's answer was not our answer. We talked about how our prayer experiences are also a part of our faith story as well. Let us pray.

Have you ever been “stuck on the fence”? Have you ever felt like you were caught in the middle? Sometimes this is an uncomfortable place to be. But I really think that most of the time we prefer to be in the middle. More often than not, I think we would rather take the middle ground, avoid choosing sides, play the role of peace maker. So, decision time.

In today’s scripture reading, we heard two people clearly taking sides. If I were to ask you to identify with either the Pharisee or the tax collector in today’s



story, who would you be? If I asked those who identify more with the Pharisee to go to this side wall and those who identify more with the tax collector to go to that wall, where would you go? Take a second, take stock of your past few

days, your past few weeks. Think about who you identify more with. Be honest. Do you have your mind made up? Are you ready to get up and move to one wall or the other? Are you ready?!

How many of you are uncomfortable right now? How many of you would just rather stay sitting right where you are? Why do we like to reside here, in the safe space in the middle? Is it really safer in the middle? Is it easier to reside in the middle ground? In our story today, the Pharisee and the tax collector represent the two extremes. Jesus told us we cannot be lukewarm. We must be solid in our beliefs. Remember the Pharisee’s words, *“I am really glad that I am not like that tax collector over there.”*

When we choose a definitive side, it can lead us to judge

**“I am really glad I am not like that tax collector over there.”**

those who are not with us. It can be all too easy to judge others because it defines the us/them alignment and it also often makes us feel better by comparison. But God calls us to be more.



In the book of Joel, one of the Old Testament prophets, we read these selected verses from chapter two: "*The LORD said:*  
<sup>23</sup> *People of Zion, celebrate in honor of the LORD your God!*

<sup>26</sup> *My people, you will eat until you are satisfied. Then you will praise me for the wonderful things I have done.* <sup>27</sup> *Israel, you will know that I stand at your side. I am the LORD your God — there are no other gods.* <sup>28</sup> *Later, I will give my Spirit to everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will have dreams, and your young men will see visions.* <sup>32</sup> *Then the LORD will save everyone who faithfully worships him."*

In these verses from Joel, we are reminded of who God is. God is our provider. God stands at our side. God's Spirit will be poured out on everyone. Through the Holy Spirit, we will prophesy and dream dreams and see visions. Then the Lord will save everyone who calls on His name. Do you hear the inclusivity here? Do you hear the word "everyone"? Everyone who faithfully worships God will be saved. God is an inclusive God. God loves us all.

In Joel we are reminded of a God who loves us all, who so desires to welcome us all into the family. But in Luke we read of how sometimes people are excluded from the family. And in reality, we too sometimes make decisions or judgments

about who can be in the family and who maybe does not deserve to be in the family. Often times there are many factors that determine who we see as worthy of being in the family and who we see as being unworthy. I think there are many factors that determine how this is decided. The primary two are our understanding of God and the experiences in our lives. In Joel and throughout the Bible, we hear repeatedly how we are all God's children. We are told to go to all peoples with the good news. But to some it is hard to go. Sometimes our experiences are barriers to being totally inclusive.

In 1991, Kristin and I were preparing to move from Connecticut to Oelrichs, South Dakota, where I had accepted a teaching position. Coincidentally, one of my good high school friends, Mark, was moving to California about the same time we were moving to South Dakota. Mark was having a going away party for his girlfriend, who was moving out to California ahead of him. So in June, Kristin and I went down to their tiny apartment in New York City for Andrea's going away party. On the way back home, we pulled off in a rest stop along Interstate 90. It looked something like this picture. As we were getting back into our vehicle, a young man came up to us. He told us how he and his wife and young children were stranded at the rest stop and needed money for gas. So we gave him \$10 and we were on our way. Fast forward two months. Kristin, her dad Ray, and I traveled back to New York in his pick-up with a trailer in tow. We loaded up all of Mark and Andrea's belongings and headed back to Connecticut. We pulled off in a rest stop along Interstate 90. It looked something like this picture. As we were getting back into our vehicle, a young man came up to us.



He told us how he and his wife and young children were stranded at the rest stop and needed money for gas. I did not give him \$10 this time. I wanted to climb out of the vehicle and get my original \$10 back. But we just dismissed him and went on our way.



Four winters ago I was walking back to the church after a meeting at the YMCA just down the street. Two individuals came up to me and asked for money so that they could get a cup of coffee to warm up. They told me they had spent the night on the street and needed to warm up. In past messages and newsletter articles I have mentioned that I volunteered each Friday afternoon at the HOPE Center. It is a warm, safe, welcoming environment and they always have a pot of coffee on. So I invited these two individuals to walk with me over to the HOPE Center, where I could introduce them to the staff plus they could get a cup of coffee and spend some time warming up. I was angrily cursed at as they walked away, upset that I would not just give them money.



Our experiences in life color our decision making concerning who we see as worthy of our love and, therefore, as worthy of God's love. I hesitated about sharing these two experiences because I did not want to color your perceptions or affect your outlook. I spent many Friday afternoons at the HOPE Center. I met and became friends with many wonderful, generous people, Christians and non-Christians alike, all struggling in life. As I got to know many individuals, as I heard their stories, it

softened these other two experiences that I just shared. One reality is that the world is filled with both good and bad people, with both people genuinely in need and with people who take advantage of things. Our reality as Christians must be the reality we find in Joel and in Jesus. Again, in Joel we are reminded that God loves all of us, that we are all God's children. God is totally inclusive. It is clearly not our role to judge who is worthy and who is not. God is totally inclusive. Today we have the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. This story is about welcoming all into God's family. It is not about excluding others.



In Luke, the Pharisee and tax collector are about as opposite as they could be. The Pharisee is well-respected, is looked up to. The Pharisee is seen by most as being close to God. The tax collector is despised by all people. The tax collector is looked down upon and reviled. The tax collector is seen as far from God. When viewed from this point, we all hope we are more like the Pharisee. But when we look below the surface, we do not really desire to be like the Pharisee. For the Pharisee, his prayer is all about what he does. He fasts two days a week and he gives one tenth of all he has. For the tax collector, it is all about what God does. The tax collector realizes that no matter what he does, he is still a sinner. He stands off in the corner, he will not even look up to heaven, and he begs for pity from God. The Pharisee does it all himself; he has no need for God. The tax collector knows that he can do nothing by himself; he has nothing but a need for God.

In our lives, we are the Pharisee at times, for good and bad; we are the tax collector at times as well, both for good and bad. At times people may look at you and think you have life together, that you are blessed. What a good person – they are so kind and they are in church every Sunday. So faithful and obedient, just like the Pharisee. All are good things. But at times we stumble, we fall into temptations and maybe even into sin. If it is public at all, others look at us like we are the tax collector. Maybe it is a bit more private and we just feel like the tax collector. We truly walk in both men's shoes.

Ultimately though, we need to be like the tax collector in our walk of faith. If we try and act like the Pharisee, like we have it all together and can handle it all on our own, surely life will intercede and humble us. If we try and pass judgment on others as a means to making ourselves feel better, then surely we are nearing a fall of our own. Each of us, like the tax collector, is a sinner. Each of us needs to acknowledge our sin and come before the Lord our God to beg for pity, for mercy, for forgiveness. We do this when our sin is large and obvious. When we have grievously sinned, when we feel that burning conviction, we cannot wait to lay our sins at Jesus' feet and to seek His mercy. But at other times our sin is not so large and obvious. Satan works in small and insidious ways. When someone in need asks for money, do I recall that time at the rest stop or that time when I was cussed out and hesitate. Worse yet do I judge what they might do with the money if I give them some? Is this sin? Yes, it is.

I do need to be like the tax collector, to come regularly before God to beg for mercy, to plead for forgiveness, to seek God's presence and demonstrate my need for God. I cannot do it on my own. Can any of us? When we realize that we need God, then we come near to the place where we can truly share with others what God does for us. This begins to help others see why they need God in their lives as well. It is when we live our lives like the tax collector, acknowledging that we are all sinners in need of God alone, it is then that we begin to see others as fellow sinners also in need of God's grace. You can imagine how the Pharisee and the tax collector would act if they left the temple that day and encountered a prostitute or a widow or a beggar. One would pass by on the other side of the street, thinking poorly of the one in need. One would stop and talk and offer what he could. Which does God call us to be?

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4, verse six and seven reads, "*My life is like a drink offering being poured out on the altar. <sup>7</sup> I have fought well. I have finished the race, and I have been faithful.*" Do we stop and talk and offer what we can? Do we allow our own lives to be poured out like an offering, in service to one another? As Paul is drawing close to the end of his journey, he reflects back on how he has lived his life for God. Isn't this how we want to look back on our lives as well, a life poured out for God?

"My life is like a drink offering being poured on the altar. I have fought well. I have finished the race, and I have been faithful."

Sometimes we fear helping certain people. Sometimes we look at the other like the Pharisee looked at the tax collector. Sometimes we doubt that we can make a difference. But God is faithful. God is true. God is able. Paul echoes Joel's words as he writes of this in verses 17 and 18: *"<sup>17</sup> But the Lord stood beside me. He gave me the strength to tell his full message, so that all Gentiles would hear it. And I was kept safe from hungry lions. <sup>18</sup> The Lord will always keep me from being harmed by evil, and he will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. Praise him forever and ever!"* God will do the same for us. God will give us the strength. With God we are able. God will keep us safe. And if we pour ourselves out for others, then one day, God will bring everyone into his heavenly kingdom as well.

"But the Lord stood beside me. He gave me strength... I was kept safe... he will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom."

We are all sinners, saved by grace alone. We are all children of God, children since that moment we were knit together in the womb. We are called to live our lives in such a way that everyone comes to know God's love through us. Part of our developing faith story is our increasing ability to see all as worthy of our love and of God's love. When we begin to see all as worthy of our love and of God's love, we begin to see the world as God intended it to be. May it be so this week. Amen.

## Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Who do you more often identify with – the Pharisee or the tax collector?  
Which do you wish you were more like? How do you change?
- 2) God is inclusive. Who do you tend to exclude or want to exclude? How can you allow God to work in your heart to make you more inclusive?
- 3) How does acknowledging you are a sinner that cannot 'make it' on your own change how you look at the 'other'?
- 4) Read 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:7 again. What would it look like in your life to run the race God has set before you without striving to outrun others?