

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Christ Church, Alfriston
Luke 18:9-14	27 October 2019

Two men walk into the Temple.  
A Pharisee and a Tax Collector.  
Sounds like the start of a cheesy joke, right?  
In a funny kind of a way it is, because this parable turns all the expectations upside down.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector.  
These two men are more different than they are similar.  
One is part of the religious establishment, one is not.  
One is law-abiding, the other is not.  
One is respected the other is despised.  
One is confident, the other is desperate.  
One is smug, the other humble.

All of these point to a much bigger difference.  
A theological difference.  
One man is righteous. The other is justified.

Which means what, exactly?

My mate David Lose<sup>1</sup> comes to the rescue to help unpack the difference. He says,

“To be **righteous**, according to the [bible],  
is to conform your life to the law.  
It is to achieve **through diligent effort**

a life that reflects the tenets of the Torah  
and in this way **remain in relationship** with [God,]  
the Holy One of Israel.

That’s no small deal.  
This man had structured his life in such a way  
to be faithful to the expectations of Scripture.  
And so the Pharisee forms a prayer that expresses gratitude that  
he’s not like all that  
motley lot of sinners.  
Sounds dreadful, but the irony is that he’s right.  
“He is **not** like the other people he mentions –  
not **at all** like the thieves, rogues, adulterers, or tax collectors to  
whom he compares himself.  
In every possible way he is righteous  
according to the law.  
He **is** different.”

But he has fallen for the temptation to measure himself not just  
against the law, but against **others**.  
The purpose religious law  
was to **help** one’s neighbour –  
and yet he is using it  
as a way in which to **judge** one’s neighbour.

The people he lists: thieves, rogues, adulterers,  
and tax collectors “are no longer neighbors  
or fellow citizens, let alone children of the same God, but rather  
“other people.”

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<sup>1</sup> All of the quoted text in this sermon comes from David Lose, *In the Meantime*.

He has used his difference from them  
to further distance himself from them.

Righteousness, the point of which was  
relationship with God, has disintegrated into  
**self-righteousness** and has cut him off  
from true relationship with those God has given  
as brothers and sisters.

So there's the Pharisee.  
Standing next to him is the tax-collector.

In Jesus' day, taxation was a pretty lucrative business,  
but not a good way to make friends.  
To specialise in tax, was to be viewed as a traitor –  
one who sided with the gentile oppressors, the Romans.  
Tax collectors were considered devoid of ethics or morals,  
and they were roundly hated.

First century taxation law went something like this:  
tax collectors would be provided with a legal tax rate,  
and then quietly inflate it to whatever they liked,  
absconding with the difference.  
It was a grossly unjust system,  
another tool of the oppressive regime,  
and the ordinary men and women in the street  
were its victims.

And yet this is the man whom Jesus said went away justified.  
"To be justified, is to be called and considered worthy and  
**restored** to right relationship with God  
**by God's own action** rather than by our own."

David Lose says,  
"Justification, in contrast to righteousness,  
does not depend on our own efforts and, indeed,  
has nothing to do with them.  
We can take neither credit nor responsibility  
for our standing before God  
yet recognize that we are recipients of a profound gift."

The key to understanding justification, is love.

"Think about it: we do not remain in relationship  
with people based on their perfect behavior  
but rather out of love.  
(And let's not forget that those **most important** to us also remain  
in relationship **with us**  
**despite** our many shortcomings.)  
Love and forgiveness –  
these are the key elements of justification  
because they initiate and maintain relationship."

What leads out of that is gratitude and generosity.  
Looking around us, we see all others in a similar vein, people that  
God has created and loves and out of love has also justified.

And while this distinction between  
righteousness and justification  
is important theologically,  
it is far more important in terms of our everyday life.

Because, though perhaps I wouldn't want to admit it  
being a good Christian,  
I find I can relate all too well to the Pharisee.  
Measuring myself by my achievements  
or against others' apparent lack of achievement  
is a temptation for me too.

It's classic Prodigal's elder brother behaviour.  
Classic behaviour for those of us who –  
consciously or unconsciously –  
suspect that we have arrived where we are  
by our own hard work, our sensible choices,  
or moral behaviour.  
We work so hard, don't we as parents, employees, friends,  
children, volunteers, citizens, Christians.  
And all of that matters.

But it is a very subtle and seductive temptation  
to then think that those are the things that  
determine our worth.  
In which case, what need have we of God?

But "the goal of being self-made, self-sufficient,  
and impervious to need  
is a myth, even a lie,  
one that is a crushing burden to carry  
and is routinely exposed by any illness or loss."

The purpose of this parable  
– in fact the purpose of Jesus' entire ministry –  
was to remind us that we are "beloved children of God  
and of infinite worth to God."

If only we didn't have to keep learning it.

Because when we know ourselves justified,  
out of that comes incredible freedom  
to do all sorts of [wonderful and kind and caring] things  
but **not** in order to **deserve** God's love  
because we already have it."

When that is our starting place,  
then our entire way of seeing the world will shift.  
Gratitude will become a hallmark  
as will generosity towards others.  
We will be less likely to measure ourselves against others, and  
more likely to be able to see that  
all those we might have thought of as 'other'  
are **also** beloved children of God.

Two men walked into a Temple.  
A Pharisee and a Tax Collector. Both loved by God.  
One of them astonished and humbled.  
The other thinking it was no less than he deserved.  
Both about as wrong as it was possible to be.