

JUST WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE ANYWAY?

Luke 18: 9-14

When I was a boy growing up in South Dakota we lived in a little town west of Mitchell, S.D. called White Lake. White Lake was and still is just a very small town. If I remember correctly it was about 300 people. There wasn't really much to do in that little town growing up but one of the ways for my buddies and me to spend a Saturday afternoon at that time was to take in a movie at the theater. A group of us would arrive early and warm up on a series of cartoons. But we really went to see the cowboy movies. They had one just about every Saturday afternoon.

I didn't know it at the time but looking back I think what I like about those old cowboy movies was they were so predictable. The bad guys always wore black and rode dark horses. Whenever they spoke, they spoke with a snarl. The good guys always wore white hats and rode white horses. And from time to time, while they were chasing down the bad guys they would stop and sing to us with their guitars.

I hardly ever went to church or S.S. as a boy but if I did take in an occasional S.S. Class at the Methodist Church I knew, for example, that at some point in time there had been a big shoot out in someplace called Egypt between a bad guy named Pharaoh and a good guy named Moses. From my experience with cowboys in the movies I knew that Pharaoh would have been dressed in black and the cowboy named Moses rode around in a white robe in my imagination. And it was no surprise to us that a little cowboy named David sang with a harp, because in our minds that were a kind of old-fashioned guitar, so that all made good sense to me as I reviewed and relived it in my 9 and 10 year old cowboy imagination world.

As I got older however I kind of burned out on the cowboy movies, because I made the observation that they were so very predictable. They just didn't deal with real people living in a real world. As much as I enjoyed it for a while in my young world of imagination and romanticism of the West I began to quickly figure out it just wasn't that way in the real world.

I also found out when I got a little older and started reading the Bible that I had to be careful of jumping to forgone conclusions about the good guys and

the bad guys that were set forth in some of the stories there. If you have don't get past that cowboys and Indians mentality when you read the Bible you can get yourself in a real jack pot real fast and miss a lot of what the Lord was actually teaching about. Let me give you an example of that.

Take the story in Luke chapter 18. As soon as we get a line on the cast of characters, if you are not careful it's pretty easy to make up your mind as to who the guy in the white hat is and who the guy in the black hat is.

We know that one of these two guys was a Pharisee, and like Pavlov's dogs, we have been conditioned to think of all Pharisees as evil and nasty fellows. So, mentally we proceed to color him black. On the other hand, the other fellow in the story is a tax collector. We recognize that tax collectors were not the best of men, but we suspect that in this story, at least, we're dealing with a good guy in disguise.

But had you stood there on that ancient afternoon when Jesus first told this parable, you would not have come to any such naive conclusions. In the eyes of good and decent men of that day, the Pharisee was a religious and a moral success. He could stand in the temple and pray, "I thank you that I am not like other men — extortionist, evildoers, adulterers. I tithe all that I take in. I fast twice each week." Now here is the interesting thing about this, this guy was praying sober and total truth. In business, this Pharisee in the black hat had not made his living by driving his neighbor to the wall. His word was his bond. When he made a promise, you could count on it.

Believe it or not this guy was a moral man.

Measured by any conventional standard, ancient or modern, the Pharisee was a religious success. He says that he fasted twice each week. That was far more than the Old Testament asked for. In the ancient law, the people of God were asked to fast once each year—on the Day of Atonement. But in his devotion to his religion, this Pharisee would not be held to that. So, twice each week, on Monday and Thursday, he denied himself food.

He also says he gave a tithe of all that he took in. I suspect he is saying more than that he was a tither. That would have been characteristic of a great many people of his day. I think he is saying he tithed those things the law did not ask him to tithe. Perhaps each year he figured up his net worth and gave a tenth of that to God.

This Pharisee was in deep earnestness about his religion; you had to be serious about it to make yourself as uncomfortable as he made himself and the additional things he imposed on himself to demonstrate to his commitment. God was as real to him as the shekels in his pocket, and he was willing to lower his standard of living a bit for him. And his religion had done him good: the people in the community respected and admired him as an outstanding citizen, a contributor to the community.

In fact, even the tax collector who came to services on that ancient Sabbath admired and respected the Pharisee. Jesus said when the tax collector entered the temple; he stood far from this noble leader of the religious community. He did not feel worthy to stand by his side.

If you think this tax collector was merely a good-natured chap willing to admit his limitations, you do need to be reminded of the place of tax collectors in the first century. Whenever Rome wanted to tax a province, it sold the right to tax to the highest bidder. And once a man purchased the right to tax, he was free to take anything the traffic would bear. He usually discovered it could bear a great deal. You couldn't do business without doing business with a tax collector. You couldn't move your goods from town to town without stopping by his desk.

As a result, extortion was built into the job; injustice was part of the trade. Tacitus, the Roman historian, says that once he visited a village that had had such an honest tax collector that the village erected a monument to his memory. Some men are traitors by one awful deed of cowardice, but a tax collector was a traitor all day and every day. He was despised by most people. Instead, he spent much of his time with extortionists, evildoers, and the sexually immoral.

Now I want us to look at this story different than we normally would if we just read it carelessly and put a black hat on the Pharisee without taking the time to see if it rightly belonged there all the time.

There are two major observations that we need to make and then make applications to our very own hearts and lives and see if we understand this story as well as we thought we did.

There are two major observations in these verses that we should pay diligent attention to.

I. We Should Be Very Concerned with Self-Righteous Comparisons that we make between our selves and others. Here is the reason.

If both of these men, the Pharisee and the tax collector, were running for public office, judging only from outward appearance and what we know about both men at this point we would do our best to elect the Pharisee. If the tax collector got in, we would feel that corruption had invaded our society and someone had stuffed the ballot box. If both of these fellows were to come to your door as a parent to date your daughter, you'd be pleased to have the Pharisee as a potential son-in-law, but hardly the tax collector.

It's not so simple, then, to discover why Jesus decides the verdict as he does. It's not easy to see why he turns our values upside-down, why he commends the person we would condemn and condemns the person we would commend. But He's not dealing with caricatures; he's dealing with characters. To understand this story, then, we've got to look at it more closely.

When we do, we discover that the Pharisee and the tax collector are both in the temple. Certainly Jesus is not criticizing them for that. In the temple the daily sacrifices were offered. In the temple men and women, through those sacrifices, came into a relationship with God. We also see that both of them are praying, and Jesus is not giving them low marks for that. In fact, in the previous parable, Jesus told a story whose purpose was that men and women ought always to pray and not to faint.

But as we listen to the prayer of the Pharisee, the guy who from the story appears to be wearing the white hat of the good guy from all that we know about the wonderful things he does and how good he is we begin to get a little uneasy. He says, in verse 11 “I thank you that I am not like other men—extortioners, evildoers, adulterers. I fast twice each week. I give a tithe of all that I take in. I thank you especially that I'm not like that tax collector.” What upsets us is that we feel this man is conceited. He is really quite proud of who he is and what he has done and is doing in his life.

If you and I were going to give him a bit of spiritual counsel, we would urge him to be more modest. We'd say to him, "Look, what you pray is true, but

you ought not to pray it in public. It sounds bad, conceited. You ought to be careful how you pray." "Your prayer is inflammatory and self exalting. Don't be so quick to lift up yourself and your virtues let other people do that.

In the assortment of sins that men and women commit, one of the sins we don't like (at least in other people) is the **sin of conceit**. We like our heroes modest, and conceit has a way of putting us off. When a N.F.L. running back breaks through the line back runs seventy yards, scores a touchdown, and then is interviewed on television, we like him to say he made the long run because of the good line in front of him. We don't like him to say, "I'm the best and fastest runner in the National Football League."

Conceit has a way of rubbing us wrong.

Or, can you remember ever taking a test and you've gotten a C minus. As the person next to you looks at his test paper, you ask, "What did you get?"

He says, "Oh, I got an A. That was an easy exam. I didn't even study for it. Got an A! You didn't have any trouble with it, did you?" You're willing to admit the other person's a better student than you; it's obvious to the professor as well. What you don't like is to have him say it. You don't like his conceit. It puts you down. It rubs you wrong. Sometimes conceit leads us to make some really back judgments concerning ourselves and our abilities and what the true reality is as viewed through the eyes of other people.

A young woman went to her pastor and said, "Pastor, I have a besetting sin, and I want your help. I come to church on Sunday and can't help thinking I'm the prettiest girl in the congregation. I know I ought not to think that, but I can't help it. I want you to help me with it."

The pastor replied, "Mary, don't worry about it. In your case it's not a sin. It's just a horrible mistake."

That is often true of conceit. There are people who talk big because inside they feel small. It's a way of covering up feelings of inadequacy. I want to share something now that you need to think about in order to understand the story before us. Conceit is a character flaw and is often a result of over compensating for a feeling of deep inadequacy. As far as God is concerned, conceit is a lot like acne: disturbing but not fatal. It's a misunderstanding of

who you are or what you are but it often doesn't have any malice with it, it's just an incorrect assumption.

The trouble with this Pharisee was not conceit, not pimples on his skin. The trouble was in the bloodstream. He is standing in the temple—in the presence of God—and thinking that the differences that matter among men matter with the Almighty. The problem with the Pharisee was a lot more than conceit it was sinful selfish pride.

Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable to those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. One of the symptoms of self-righteousness is a critical spirit, because one of the ways we feed our self-righteousness is by comparing ourselves with others. We usually look at their vices and think of our virtues, and that, we assume, gives us special standing with God. We have a way of cutting other people off at the knees and putting ourselves up on stilts. In comparison, we seem to stand tall.

Whenever you hear somebody always criticizing other people, see it as a manifestation of a self-righteous spirit. It's a kind of insanity that says, "If I pull your house down, my house stands taller." That is self-righteousness and the way proud people feed their pride.

Pope Gregory the Great said of this Pharisee that he was like a man who had killed an elephant, but who was killed by the elephant's fall. The stench, the smell that comes out of this passage—this horrible aroma that has about it the smell of a dump yard on a hot summer day—is the smell of grace gone sour.

Here was a man with benefits: he had knowledge of the Scriptures; he had been brought up in a good environment; his religious life had contributed positively to his character. But he took those things for granted; he thought that the good things given to him made him a creature of special merit and put him in special standing before God. Even though he thanks God, he is really practicing self-congratulation. He is saying, "Lord, you have made a good soup. But you couldn't have done it without good material like me to work with." That's the smell of grace gone putrid.

O how careful we Christians need to be of this kind of a self-righteousness. Right here in Rock Springs and in your personal life you and I have been

given so many advantages that many others don't have. But be careful you don't take those advantages and in your mind turn them into virtues. Because then you begin to look at these "virtues" and compare yourself with others. You can gradually begin to feel that as the mass of people go, you are pretty special, special to others and special to God. That's the stink of grace gone putrid.

You can see it in churches, seminaries, and Christian colleges and in individual Christians. Across the years, they like this Pharisee can honestly state that they have been true to truth. By God's grace they have the truth. But in order to prove just how true they are, they begin to look at other churches, seminaries, or Christians and point out all the differences. When they do it, there are no tears streaming from their eyes; their hearts are not broken. No, they feel they're pretty special, the objects of God's blessing because they deserved it. That is the smell of grace gone putrid.

This Pharisee was in the presence of God, and in the presence of God he thought that the distinctions that mattered among men mattered with the Almighty. In the presence of God, he had a good eye on himself, a bad eye on his neighbor, and no eye on God.

II. We Must Be More Concerned with Living in God's Presence than with Hypocrisy in others.

"But the tax collector," Jesus said, "stood far off and kept beating his breast." That was something that people in deep distress did. "And he would not even look up into heaven." He looked down at earth. When the standard way to pray was to look up into the heavens, he kept beating his breast saying, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

You say, "All right, he was humble. But after all, he had a lot to be humble about: he was a tax collector. He was a crook if ever there was one" But you can have left-wing Pharisees and right-wing Pharisees, like the Sunday school teacher who, after teaching this story, said, "Now, boys and girls, let's bow our heads and thank God we're not like that nasty Pharisee."

This tax collector could have stood in the presence of God and said, "O God, I thank you that I'm not as other men are. I especially thank you I'm not like that Pharisee. I don't pray long prayers in public. I don't pray like a religious type. I know I have sinned, and I'm willing to admit it. And even if I had done all these things, at least you know and I know that I'm not a hypocrite."

Have you known some who magnify their sinfulness and somehow think that by telling how bad and sinful they were that they are glorifying God when in actuality it can be a back handed way of drawing attention to their sin and self over the holiness and righteousness of God. It is a stupid and prideful person who thinks that by taking the bandages off the putrid sores of his or her life while they were living in sin, and sharing carnally how wicked he or she was in great detail that they become a creature of merit in so doing. You could wish that such people would take a short course in common sense and cover up those sores.

A few years ago, two men held up a bank in Dallas. For reasons I do not know, only one of them wore a mask. In ten or fifteen minutes they were captured. Can you imagine one of those men standing before the judge and saying, "Your Honor, I admit I robbed the bank. I admit that I did it. But at least I went in there without as mask. I was not a hypocrite. Everybody saw who I was." That doesn't make it with a judge in Dallas. So, if you want to play the game of Pharisee, you can play it from any position on the board. This tax collector stood in the presence of God, and in the presence of God he kept beating his breast, saying, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

One of the benefits of living in God's presence is this: when you really see God, you see yourself; when you see yourself, you see your sin; when you see your sin, you cry out to God for grace and forgiveness, and you receive it. The saint is always more aware of his need of God than his successes in God, always more aware of how far he has to go than how far he has come.

Job is described by the Biblical writer as the most righteous man of his day. When he suffered, his friends told him he was suffering severely because he had sinned badly. Job denied that, refused to accept that. Then, at the end of the book, Job receives a vision of God. When he sees the vision, Job responds, "I have heard of you with the hearing of my ear, but now my eye sees you, and I repent in sackcloth and ashes." Seeing God, he saw himself;

seeing himself, he saw his sins; seeing his sin, he saw his need of grace and forgiveness. And he cried out to God for cleansing.

Isaiah was the cream of young manhood of his day. But in an hour of national and personal crisis, when a mighty king had died, Isaiah stood in the temple and caught a vision of God, high and lifted up, his train filling the temple. And when Isaiah caught that vision of God, he said, "Woe is me. I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips. I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips." When Isaiah saw God, he also saw himself; when he saw himself, he saw his sin; when he saw his sin; he saw his need of forgiveness and grace. And he cried out to God for cleansing.

In Paul's first letter to his young friend, Timothy, he says, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim. 1:15 NIV). Did you notice the verb? It is not "I was the worst, back there on the Damascus Road, when I was persecuting the church," but "I am the worst of sinners. Now that I have preached the gospel across the empire, now that I have established churches in the major cities, now that I have suffered persecution for God—I am the worst of sinners." Why does he say this? Because a verse later he says, "Now, to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever."

If you live in the presence of God and live in the light of his holiness, you will see your sin. And when you see your sin, you see your need of forgiveness, and you cry out to God for grace to cleanse you.

None of us will ever outgrow our need of grace or forgiveness. The more you know of God's light, the more you see your own shadow. And the more you become aware of your need of God's grace, and the more often you cry out for God's cleansing and grace, the more you realize how much God gives you.

H. G. Wells was no friend of the church, but sometimes he served us well. Years ago in the *New Yorker*, he told a story about an Episcopalian clergyman. (He could have told it about a preacher from any denomination.) This Episcopalian bishop was the kind of man who always said pious things to people. When troubled folks came to him, he found that a particularly helpful thing to say, if said in a right tone of voice, was, "Have you prayed about it?" If said in just the right way, it seemed to settle things.

The bishop himself didn't pray much; he had life wrapped up in a neat package. But one day life tumbled in on him, and he found himself overwhelmed. It occurred to the bishop that maybe he should take some of his own advice. So, one Saturday afternoon he entered the cathedral, went to the front, and knelt on the crimson rug. Then he folded his hands before the altar (he could not help but think how childlike he was).

Then he began to pray. He said, "O God," and suddenly there was a voice. It was crisp, businesslike. The voice said, "Well, what is it?"

Next day when the worshipers came to Sunday services, they found the bishop sprawled face down on the crimson carpet. When they turned him over, they discovered he was dead. Lines of horror were etched upon his face. What H. G. Wells was saying in that story is simply this: **there are folks who talk a lot about God who would be scared to death if they saw him face to face.**

Yet that is where we are called to live. That is the secret of humility—not looking inward at your deficiencies or weaknesses, not looking outward at other people, comparing yourself with them, their vices against your virtues, and their virtues against your vices. Humility comes from looking up into the face of God—who is holy love and loving holiness—to see ourselves and our need of forgiveness, to cry out for grace for daily life. Seeing God is to see ourselves. And to see ourselves is to understand what humility is.

Isaac Watts captured it when he wrote, "When I survey the wondrous cross / On which the Prince of Glory died, / My richest gain I count but loss, / And pour contempt on all my pride. / Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, / Save in the Cross of Christ my God: / All the vain things that charm me most, / I sacrifice them to His blood."