Sunday, April 16, 1972
PRAYER AND RIGHT LIVING
Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told a very simple story about two religious men; both of them went into the temple to pray. One felt good because he had not violated the community mores and he had lived up to the religious ideals of private devotions and of tithing his income. Also, he looked down his nose at people who were guilty of impulse, spontaneity, and opportunism.

The other, an internal revenuer, had nothing to commend himself for except that he was hated and regretted it, “God, be merciful to me a sinner” probably meant, “I want to belong, and I know that I have to change to do so.”

Both of these people about whom Jesus told this short story came out of a tradition which, like ours, took it for granted that prayer is not a substitute for right living, but ought to be its inspiration, its b1essing, and a help to some discrimination between right and wrong.

Now as we hear this story, we are likely to think to ourselves, we certainly are not Pharisees, and who among us is a crook or an extortioner? Oh, maybe we’ve been slightly dishonest at times, but never very seriously-- just little sins. And perhaps like the Pharisee, we’ve been a little bit proud of our merit and worth, but again never very seriously. After all, we think, we’re decent people and that’s all that counts.

But maybe we are the characters in this parable. Let’s see if we can find ourselves in the story as we proceed.

Incidentally, one reason that we have failed to see our-selves in the story is that usually we overdraw the picture of both the Pharisee and the sinner.

Actually, the Pharisees in Jesus’ time were a particular party of Jewish people whose aim was to encourage people to fulfil the law. That law, as they had received it from their forefathers, included what you and I would call ceremonial law, for example, proper diet (no pork), proper clothing, proper posture for prayer. But the law as the Pharisees understood it also included the ten commandments, and many other central formulations of man’s duty to God and to his neighbor. 2.

It was then a Pharisee, this first man in Jesus’ story, who went into the temple to pray. His prayer began, “God, I thank you,” There is certainly nothing wrong with that. In fact, it has generally been agreed that the purest and most powerful motive behind a good life, is a person’s thankful recognition of God’s love for him even when he doesn’t deserve it.

So, the Pharisee’s prayer began well, but notice how quickly he got off the track. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” Here is the reason some religious people are so often unattractive as human beings and disliked by everybody. Instead of thanking God that he has helped us to come a little closer to our moral vision of what people ought to be and to do, we tend at once to compare ourselves favorably to everybody else. It is this widespread re-ligious tendency to moral arrogance which is the most un-attractive characteristic of some of the Christian tradi-tion — particularly when we begin to divide all people into two categories — "us good people” and those “bad people.” If prayer has the effect of making anyone morally

arrogant, it easily goes on in the next stage to producing an unlovely morality, and finally a hated hypocrisy.

But the Pharisee did not stop here. After getting off to a wrong start in his prayer, he then became specific. He was thankful first that he was not an extortioner. We would probably say an exploiter. If his prayer was true, this is good. For one of the most common sins of “good” people is an all too strong a tendency to exploit others for their own benefit. This is both an individual and a collective sin. When the Old Testament, reinforced by Jesus, centers on. the great commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” the point is exactly this. That commandment, taking for granted a natural self-love and self-interest, .is not a romantic, impossible, utopian ideal. All it says is to include your neighbor. Don’t exploit him. And further, as Jesus taught it, let the neighborhood grow and grow!

What our praying Pharisee was most likely being thankful for was that he was not a criminal extortioner, a robber or a thief. His prayer, however, revealed no insight into whether he and the other good people were not all to some extent at least, exploiters of the poor and, therefore, extortioners.

The problem with the Pharisee was that, like most of us, he thought of morality only in personal terms. He had not personally taken something from his neighbor or from the poor. But we can be person-ally morar1.ea1ict yet impersonally immoral and unjust. In our time this problem is even greater.

Some months ago, in the television series “All in the Family” Archie Bunker tried unsuccessfully to explain to a young Puerto Rican working under him why he, Archie had to fire him. “It isn’t me; it’s the system,” insisted Archie, whose genuine compassion for the Puerto Rican was influenced by the fact that in the same episode he had also experienced the arbitrary unreasonableness of “the system“. “Where’s the system so I can complain to him?” asked the young man pathetically.

When Archie responded, “I don’t know,” his eyes were unusually eloquent with unspoken thoughts and suggestions that he had caught some glimpse of the problem of trying to be personally moral yet finding himself caught in something vaster and more impersonal, and unjust.

Most of us have been shocked in recent weeks in reading of the multimillion-dollar housing frauds in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, and other cities. The result of these graft-ridden operations has been to increase the blight in central cities and to cheat homebuyers as well as the tax-paying public.

Coming on top of a series of other scandals during recent years involving the largest railroad in the nation, the largest conglomerate corporation, the largest defense con-tractor and many companies in these and other fields, we wonder again about personal and impersonal morality and immorality. Most of the people involved in these systems are undoubtedly moral persons in personal terms. As in-dividuals, they wouldn’t think of stealing from a neighbor. They are not in that sense extortioners or exploiters. But what about the larger sense? Sometimes personal good-ness can be almost irrelevant.

It’s no wonder a man said to me the other day—“Give me the old-time tycoons, the ruthless operators who hired and fired without any sentimentality or hypocrisy.” I asked why and he explained that he had just be “let go” from a job he had held for fifteen years, after a merger

between his company and a larger one. He said, “there’s nobody I can blame, nobody I can be angry at, and that frustrates me.

He went on to say that everybody in his company was decent. The pay was good, the working conditions were more than tolerable. There were all kinds of fringe benefits. All the executives were warm and sympathetic toward your prob-lems. They were just as warm and sympathetic when they let me go.

Everybody in authority was sorry. Each one said, “If it was my decision, you would have been kept on.” And that’s the whole point, it was no one’s decision except some fictional character. And you can’t attack a fictional character. If I’d been fired by an old-fashioned tycoon who didn’t like my work or my personality or the way I wore my ties, I could’ve at least understood it.”

And then the man said to me rather poignantly, “You know the strange this is that the creed the executives live by is ‘individualism,’ but I can’t find an individual in the company willing to take the responsibility for letting me go.”

There is often a tremendous difference between our private and public morality and justice, and this is what the Pharisee and we often miss. Part of the increasing evil of modern warfare is its impersonal killing. Vast and sophisticated weapons systems controlled by computers are engaged in killing women, men, and children at long distance so that no one ever sees the victims, and no one feels or is held personally responsible, yet we are all directly or indirectly involved.

The Pharisee’s prayer was on the right track when he prayed about justice, but on the wrong track when he be-lieved that justice was easily achieved or that he was totally just in an unjust society. He failed to take into account his connection with vast systems of injustice and the problem is even greater in our time.

As the Pharisee continued his praying, lie saw out of the corner of his eye, the publican, and expressed his gratitude to God that he was more moral than this other fellow. Then he ended his prayer by reminding God that he was a dutiful church member. He not only prayed but gave 10% of his income for religious purposes.

The problem this man poses to anyone who takes organized religion seriously is whether he is in fact typical of what happens when we link prayer and right-living together. If this Pharisee is the typical result of going to church to pray, then we’ve got problems.

But let’s look at the other principal character in the parable. He is identified as a tax-collector. In the Jewish nation, ruled as it was by the hated Roman soldiers, any Jew who made his living by collecting taxes for the Roman rulers was hated and despised. Whatever kind of man he may have been personally, he could be sure that in general he would be scorned by his own people.

Why did this man come to the temple to pray? Was it be-cause he was so lonely that only there he could feel him-self to be a human being? Or did he go to pray because it was his habit? Or had some crisis driven him to the temple that day — had a 14-year-old son whom he adored made it clear that he was ashamed of his father? Or was he a sensitive fellow who really hated his work, squeezing money out of the poor? -

Jesus doesn't tell us. We only have his one sentence prayer: "God be merciful to me a sinner." He feels so bad, that he cannot even look up. He wasn't enjoying himself in church.

Some people unlike this tax-collector, enjoy confessing their faults because they believe they are impressing God and others with their humility. You've heard of people being proud of their humility. It's like paying a high price for economy. They might pray — "I thank God that I am not so proud as this Pharisee. I admit that I am an extortioner, unjust and a sinner." Or people will say--I admit that I'm prejudiced, "as if this easy admission and confession excuses their prejudice. A cartoon along this line recently appeared in a magazine. It pictured George Washington and his father standing beside the fallen cherry tree with other fallen trees in the back-ground and the irate father was saying to George: "All right, so you admit it, you always admit it. The question is, when are you going to stop doing it?"

There was also a Sunday school teacher who told her class the story of the Pharisee and tax-collector and after explaining it in some length, folded her hands and closed her presentation by saying — "Now children, let us thank 6. God we are not like that nasty Pharisee." But such was not the case with the tax-collector in the parable.

With the parable Jesus is telling us that the moral result of prayer ought to be a humbling and changing experience and sometimes therefore to most of us, quite unpleasant. There are other aspects of a worship service which on the other hand, we enjoy.

But what Jesus said in this story we are not to forget. Don't let your prayers, your relationship to God, however slight or central it may be to your being, have the effect of confirming you in self-righteousness.

We know this is the central meaning of this story because it is introduced by Luke with these words, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.11

There is a constant danger, and it is very easy for churches of every kind to produce Pharisees more or less attractive than the one in Jesus' story — people who may be highly moral in their personal lives, but quite unjust when they work in the systems of society • .....,

Some kinds of prayer can produce wrong living — the Pharisee said a prayer but did not pray. Other kinds of praying can help produce right living. Through the ages people have prayed both kinds of prayers, those of arrogance and those of humility. Listen to your own prayers. What do they tell you? What kind of living are they producing? Amen.