Sunday, November 20, 1988
THE WRONG KIND OF THANKSGIVING
Luke 18:9-14

There is a common assumption held by too many people that anything done in the name of religion must be good. A corollary to this assumption is that any kind of prayer is better than no prayer at all. I think one reason Jesus told the story about two men going into the Temple to pray was to demonstrate that both of these assumptions are false. Jesus was also saying that an individual can be irreligious in church and that some prayers are better left unsaid.

The first man in the story Jesus told prayed with these words, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” and then he went on to remind God and himself of some of his good traits and how this made him better than others. The fact that it was a prayer being prayed in the Temple, and that it included the words, “I thank you,” did not change its irreligious nature. It was the wrong kind of thanksgiving. In fact, it was not a true prayer of thanksgiving at all.

Listen to the words of people’s prayers, and it will tell you a lot about them. Listen to the words of your own prayers, and you will learn a lot about yourself.

The words of some prayers imply that prayer is a kind of magical power to be used for all sorts of trivial purposes. Prayer is presented as a shortcut toward getting whatever we want. The man who has made a fortune now claims he did it all by prayer. A close study of his career does not bear out this explanation. The athlete says he did it all by prayer, which implies that he must have been better at prayer or more righteous than his opponent.

Behind this whole philosophy is a false assumption that God can be manipulated and used for our personal advantage. Then religion is no longer about seeking God’s will and trying to follow that will; instead, we want to make God conform to our will. We come to believe that God has blessed us because we are so righteous and that we deserve all those blessings because we have earned them.

In the prayer of this first person in the story Jesus told, we can see why some religious people are so unattractive and disliked. Instead of being grateful to God with deep humility, they begin to compare themselves favorably with everyone else. It is this tendency toward moral arrogance that is the most unattractive trait of many who call themselves religious.

A medieval monk said that all of us who get to heaven will be surprised by three things. First, we will be surprised to see so many we did not think would be there. Second, we will be surprised that some are not there whom we expected to see. Third, we will be surprised that we ourselves are there.

The wrong kind of thanksgiving — let’s look more closely at this practice, which is a temptation for all of us.

The Pharisee in the story that Jesus told began his prayer on the right track, “God, I thank you.” There’s certainly nothing wrong with that. In fact, it has been generally agreed that the purest prayer is simply, “Thanks.” He should have stopped while he was ahead.

Unfortunately, he continued, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” This individual had divided all people in the world into two categories: the good and the bad, and he had no doubt at all into which category he belonged.

And he didn’t stop there. After getting off to a wrong start in his prayer, he became even more specific about how thankful he was for being better than others. He was thankful first that he was not an extortioner. We would probably say today — an exploiter. If his statement was true, that’s good. However, one of the most common sins of so-called good people is an all-too-strong tendency to exploit others for their own benefit without realizing they are doing so.

What the 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 Pharisee, like most of us, thought of morality only in personal terms. He had not personally taken something from his neighbor or from the poor. But we can be personally moral and yet impersonally or collectively immoral and unjust. We can be part of a system that is unjust or immoral and yet excuse ourselves individually.

I remember especially one episode from the popular television series years ago, “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.

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 more vast, impersonal, and unjust.

A few weeks ago, I read about a man who said, “Give me the old-time tycoons, the ruthless operators who hired and fired without any sentimentality or hypocrisy.” Someone asked him why he would make such a statement, and he explained that he had just been “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 note that everyone 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 problems. Everyone in authority was sorry. Each one said, “If it were my decision, you would have been kept on.” “And that’s the whole point of it,” he said. “It was no one’s decision except some 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 have at least understood it.”

And then he said, “The strange thing 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 frequently a tremendous difference between our private morality and public morality, and this is what the Pharisee missed and what we can miss.

The Pharisee's prayer was on the right track when he prayed about morality, but on the wrong track when he believed that he was totally moral and better than all other people. It was the wrong kind of thanksgiving. His prayer divided him from others and from God, rather than connecting him.

He ended his prayer of thanksgiving by reminding God that he was a dutiful church member. He not only prayed but gave 10% of his income for religious purposes.

The wrong kind of thanksgiving is a temptation for all of us. There is a story of a Sunday School teacher who told his class this parable. After he had explained it at some length, he closed the presentation by saying, "Now children, let us thank God we are not like that nasty Pharisee."

Now let's look at the second man in the parable that Jesus told. He is identified as a tax collector. In the Jewish nation, ruled as it was by the Romans, 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 because he was so lonely that only there could he feel himself 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? Perhaps he had a child whom he adored, and this young man or woman had made it known that they were ashamed of their father. Or was he a sensitive person who really hated his work of squeezing money out of people and skimming some off the top? Maybe he had come to repent and change his life.

Jesus doesn't give any details. We only know that the man is a tax collector, and that's enough to let us know that to others around him, he was about as low and hated as one can get. We also know the words of his simple, earnest prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And his prayer was more than words. He felt so bad that he stayed as far away from the altar as possible, and he was afraid even to look up.

He was not trying to impress others with his humility. There are people who enjoy confessing their faults because they believe they are impressing others with their openness and humility. It's possible that an individual could pray, "I thank God that I am not as proud as this self-righteous Pharisee. I admit that I am an extortioner, unjust, and a sinner." People will say, "I admit that I am prejudiced," as if this easy admission and confession excuses their prejudice. The problem is that once they admit it, they do not attempt to make any change in their outlook or behavior.

Some time ago, I cut out a cartoon from a magazine that pictured the young boy George Washington along with his father standing beside a fallen cherry tree with other fallen trees in the background, 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?'"

The wrong kind of thanksgiving prayer is one of self-righteousness and excessive pride. The right kind of thanksgiving prayer is one of humility. Its words are: "Thank you, God, you have given me more than I deserve. I know you love all people equally — in your eyes, no one has more value or less value than anyone else. Your blessings are given to all humanity." Remember, Jesus said, "God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust."

Notice that Jesus, after telling the story about the two men going up to the Temple to pray, concluded by saying, “I tell you, this last man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified rather than the other; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Listen to your own prayers of thanksgiving. What do they tell you? Amen.