Sunday, October 29, 1995
MEASURING DOWNWARD OR UPWARD
Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told a story about two religious men who went into the temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. Both of these men came from a tradition that, like ours, took it for granted that prayer is not a substitute for right living but ought to be its inspiration, its blessing, and a help in discerning right from wrong.

The Pharisee was a man who was deeply earnest about his service to God. After all, we can tell at once whether a person's heart is in something when it touches his stomach or his pocketbook. The Pharisee, according to Jesus, fasted and sacrificed, cutting down his standard of living for God. He gave a tenth of his income to the church. For him, God was at least as real as the money in his billfold and his bank account.

He was the kind of person on whom churches even today depend. He helps pay the bills and is faithful in every way. I'd love a churchful of people with his devotion — people who care enough to be faithful in their commitments, people who tithe on their income, and who thank God that they can.

As in Jesus' day, it's people like the Pharisee who hold the community together and keep the faith with diligence and passion.

The tax collector, on the other hand, exerted a corrupting influence on the community. There is no hint in the story that, following his prayer of confession, he will go home and quit his job. Maybe tomorrow he'll again take money from his neighbors, hand some over to the empire, and put some aside for himself. On the other hand, the Pharisee worked faithfully and sacrificially to preserve the community and its traditions.

When we remember this, it's not so evident why Jesus should proceed to praise the tax collector and condemn the Pharisee.

Sometimes our standard answer is that everything looks quite different in God's eyes than it does in ours. But this is too easily said and only causes more questions. Is our judgment of no value at all? Does God always turn our values upside down? Doesn't God have any appreciation of the fact that the tax collector in this story is a crook and the Pharisee a very ethical person? What kind of God is this who accepts the tax collector and rejects the Pharisee?

To understand the message of this parable, we have to first recognize that both characters in the story are to be found in each one of us.

There are many of you listening this morning who have accomplished something good, who in your home, business, or profession have dealt honestly with others when you could have cheated. And there are also those who are listening who have not been able to control their urges or desires — maybe you have been underhanded when you should have been aboveboard, or maybe you are too consumed with ambition. You are disgusted with yourself and cannot cope with it.

The point of the story is not to see the tax collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a creep. Jesus knew that his listeners, then and now, can easily fall into the trap of the Pharisee and pray, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” But we can also fall into another trap and pray, “I thank you, God, that I am not like this proud Pharisee. I am a sinner. That’s the way human beings are, and that’s what I am, but at least I admit it, and therefore I am a little better than the rest of the lot. I am an honest man, O God, because I don’t kid myself. Let your angels sing a hallelujah over this one sinner who is as honest as I am.”

Whether we are more like the tax collector or the Pharisee, we who claim to be religious need to be especially careful during the devout moments in our lives. Even humility is a virtue that is not immune to temptation. There’s the old story of the Bible teacher who told his class the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector and, after explaining it in some length, folded his hands and closed his presentation by saying, “Now students, let us thank God that we are not like that nasty Pharisee.”

Note that there are a lot of similarities between the tax collector and the Pharisee. Both want to stand before God. Both are in the temple. They are not simply seeking God in nature. Many who do this are only looking for a warm religious feeling but otherwise want to remain as they are. The God of nature does nothing to judge or change them.

Both of the individuals in this parable want more than this. They enter into the holy presence of God. They expose themselves to God’s will and claim. They are not trying to escape into cheap non-commitment. Both give thanks that there is such a thing as the mercy of God, that they can approach God.

The very fact that both approach God with a prayer of thanksgiving shows they have penetrated deeply into the mysteries of God. Beginners and casual Christians usually confine their prayers to asking God for something, especially when they are in trouble. Then, in the next moment, they have forgotten God. It was only a passing panic that exploded into prayer.

But why then is the tax collector’s prayer of thanksgiving accepted by God in the parable and that of the Pharisee rejected?

We need to go deeper to find the critical point in the Pharisee, the tax collector, and ourselves. It has to do with how each of these two individuals sees themselves and how they each arrive at their self-understanding.

If you want to know yourself, you must have a standard. And when this standard is chosen and applied, the differences between the two figures become apparent.

The Pharisee measures himself by looking downward when he tries to determine his rank before God. He chooses the corrupt tax collector as his standard. Then, of course, the differences become obvious, especially to him. Sure, the Pharisee knows he has his faults. He does not claim to be perfect. He knows the temptations that trouble him, but he has controlled them.

He doesn’t give thanks that God has spared him from being a thief, adulterer, rogue, or tax collector; he gives thanks that he is not like them. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people...” Really? Here he crosses from the grammar of gratitude into the grammar of excessive pride. It can be a very subtle line, and we almost never notice when we cross it, but

we do it all the time. What betrays us is an unexamined refusal of kinship. It shows every time we use “us-them” language.

You can feel the distance in his use of the words “this tax collector.” As one commentator wrote, “Now he has stopped praying and started peeking. Coolly, he measures himself against a neighbor and is quietly pleased with the difference.” From the other side, the same is true. Had the tax collector measured himself against the Pharisee and despaired at the difference, his prayer would have been just as false. It’s the comparative sideward glance that distorts prayer. He measured himself by first looking sideways and then downward.

Using this kind of measurement, he is content with himself. He isn’t challenged to make any improvements because he already considers himself so much better according to the standard he is using for measurement.

When I was growing up, there was a dairy company that advertised its product with the slogan, “milk from contented cows.” I do not know a lot about cows, but I do know a little about people. When we begin to measure ourselves only by looking downward, it’s easy to become too content with ourselves as we are. I worry about a religious faith that only leads to contentment.

There is a story about a mountaineer who established quite a reputation for himself as a marksman. Whoever followed him found target rings on trees and fences with a bullet hole in the center. Asked to explain the secret of his skill, he said, “It’s easy. I just shoot and draw a circle around the hole.”

The tax collector, as wrong as he is about so much, has at least got his eyes right. He doesn’t even notice the Pharisee but is standing far off, entirely lost in his poor prayer. Jesus said that he would not even look up into heaven. His eyes are looking within himself. Both men are praying about themselves, but one of them is scanning the room, while the other is oblivious to all but his own condition.

The Pharisee’s kind of self-measurement by looking downward always produces false pride. This can be illustrated by our desire to gossip. Why is it that when we are together, we take such pleasure in sinking our teeth into other people? What is the root of this strange delight that we take in discussing in whispers and feigned horror the private weaknesses and supposedly secret love affairs of prominent people?

Quite simply, because at such moments we feel so much better about ourselves and because we can say with a certain air of moral superiority, “Such things don’t occur in my life.” Or at least, “Such things may occur in my life, but they certainly should not happen to a public figure.”

Gossip, including the gossip that fills the pages of the sensational news magazines and big-headline tabloid newspapers found at the checkout counters of grocery and convenience stores, is always based on a kind of self-defense mechanism. We want our own superiority to be confirmed, and we achieve this by being horrified at others and putting ourselves above them. Anyone who looks downward and measures himself or herself by the weaknesses of others immediately becomes falsely proud.

We encounter here a practice that operates not only in the private lives of individuals but also in public life and politics. We measure our practices by looking downward.

One biblical commentator reflecting on this parable said, “Someone should draw a cartoon of a congregation at prayer with thought balloons over each head. Worshipers would be thinking in their prayers, ‘Thank you, God, that I am not like those fundamentalists,’ or ‘Thank you, I am not like those liberals,’ or ‘Thank you that I am above all this.’ Our capacity for smugness is astonishing. In the nation and in the churches, what a rage is on to assure ourselves and define ourselves by who we are not like.”

The grace of God can be corrupted by spiritual vanity. However, when a person truly turns to God with a burdened conscience, he doesn’t think of other people at all. There he or she is completely alone with God. In the parable, the tax collector, while he was praying, did not look sideways out of the corner of his eye at the Pharisee and say, “Sure this Pharisee is different from me, but he too has plenty of sins.” This would’ve been true. But when a person is utterly alone with God, then many things that are true are completely immaterial.

That’s why Jesus in the story held up the tax collector’s prayer as a positive example. He measures himself upward! God is the standard. And measuring himself by that standard, he is aware of how far removed he is. And this is exactly the time that God is closest to him.

Lest we misunderstand, the parable is not saying that there are no differences between people. Some are good, and some are bad. We have to make careful distinctions all the time. If I, as an employer, were to put a faithful, respected worker on a par with another individual with sixteen previous convictions, that would not be right.

At the same time, when we are together in worship and prayer, we should not be shocked when we suddenly find an individual with sixteen previous convictions gathered with us at the Lord’s table. We should instead give thanks for God’s grace, which extends to this person and to all of us. We are not to measure ourselves by looking downward but rather by looking upward.

Since we are dealing with a parable, we can only imagine what the tax collector was thinking when he left the temple. Did he maybe say to himself, “Now I can go back to doing my job as before because I have found out that God doesn’t cut a person off, that God justifies an individual even if he is a crook?” Or would he not rather have gone from the temple filled with radiant gratitude for God’s immeasurable grace and therefore would not want to disappoint God by falling back into his old habits?

How do you measure yourself? By looking downward or upward? Amen.