

Standing in the Need of Prayer
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
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The one reminder we need before we read this text is that - whatever stereotype Christians have put on them for 2,000 years - Pharisees in Jesus's context were people of deep faith and goodness - valued teachers. Jesus engaged with them not as enemies but as teachers with different interpretations of the same tradition - and some scholars think Jesus was from the same "school" as the Pharisees. So the story that follows is not about all Pharisees; Jesus uses the fictional Pharisee here as a surprise.

Luke 18:9-14

9 Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: **10** "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' **13** But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' **14** I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

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It's me...It's me, O Lord. Standing in the Need of Prayer.
It's me...It's me, O Lord. Standing in the Need of Prayer.
Not my brother, not my sister, it's me O Lord, Standing in the need of prayer.
Not my mother, not my father, it's me O Lord, Standing in the need of prayer.

Not the pharisee, not the tax collector, - it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Yes, the preacher, and the deacon, and me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Yes, the elder, and the leader, and me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

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Folks, this text is easy to understand and hard to live into. I don't have to preach it with some complicated exegesis or lengthy story. In Bible Study this week, we literally said, well, there's not much more to say about this text. (Words unheard of in our Bible Study.)

You know the score. The Pharisee in this text (an individual - not the whole group, and Pharisees were faithful teachers) - but this imagined, individual Pharisee, he got uppity. Ahead of himself. Arrogant. Patted himself on the back. And worst of all, he looked down his nose at someone. This wasn't just celebrating his own accomplishment and wisdom, this was delighting in someone else's failure and sinfulness.

But, Jesus says, the exalted will be humbled. Those who think too much of themselves will be pulled down off the pedestal. Straightforward if hard for those of us who would like to be able to call ourselves good.

And the other half of the parable is also easy to understand and hard to live into. We know the score, for the tax collector.

Tax collectors are bad dudes in Jesus' time. And that's not a later gloss added by the Gospel writers or Christian interpreters. Tax collectors are active participants in the oppression of the Roman empire. Two weeks from now, we're going to meet Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector who changes his ways in a concrete manner. That's a step beyond the tax collector in this parable but this one certainly has realized the error of his ways and is

praying for mercy. He hasn't committed to *teshuvah*, Hebrew for turning and change - but he's come in humility to God and prayed for mercy.

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

If we come to God, open and humble, we make room for God's grace and mercy.

As Kate Huey puts it, "If we come before God in humble openness and fervent trust in God's goodness (how else would we be forgiven but for God's goodness?), we make room for God to work in our lives."¹

It's me, it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Excellent. A short, straightforward if challenging lesson on a day when we need to wrap up early for a fire drill. Thank goodness.

Have you ever watched a TV show that has a plot twist at the end of every episode?

Well, Plot Twist.

And Bible Study folks, I'm sorry I didn't get to a certain little preposition in the Greek before this past Tuesday. I only got to it looking at Amy-Jill Levine's study of this text.

Lemme re-read you how the NRSV translates verse 14: "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other..."

Yep, this means that the tax collector who has prayed for mercy goes home justified unlike the Pharisee who is self-righteous and who goes home

¹ Sermon Seeds - Year C: Inclusive Reflections for Preaching from the United Church of Christ, Kathryn Matthews Huey, Kindle Edition.

appropriately judged and found wanting. Be like the humble tax collector. That wraps the whole thing up in a beautiful little bow.

Plot twist:

Amy-Jill Levine points out that the Greek that's translated here as "rather than the other" is *para*. Para. You might guess, similar to *parallel*. And so, Amy-Jill Levine says it's possible we could take a totally different meaning from this parable, turning on this little preposition. Something totally different than "self-righteous people bad, humble people good." I mean, that's still a good message, don't get me wrong. But what if the verse was translated, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *along with* the other..."²

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt..."

It's right there, the tiny detail offered in plain sight at the beginning of the episode that you didn't realize was going to be important. Jesus is talking to people who hold others in contempt. *So the lesson cannot be that we should hold someone in this story in contempt.*

So often we judge the self-righteous contemptuous person.

But if the parable ends with the plot twist Amy-Jill Levine suggests - just go with this possibility for a second - then God offers love, grace, mercy, even "justification" to both the self-righteous one *and* the humble one.

It's fun to judge. It's easy to say, look at that terrible person, getting their just rewards, pulled right off that pedestal. That snotty, rude, arrogant person has gotten their comeuppance and isn't it fun to watch?

² See Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi by Amy-Jill Levine, pages 207-209, Kinde Edition.

And what if this is a parable about God loving people that we don't think are lovable? That we don't think should be offered grace?

You know the story. Jonah says, God, I don't want those terrible people in Nineveh to have another chance. And God says, well, they're my children, I'm gonna give them another chance and Jonah, you're my messenger.

You know the story. There was a man who had two sons. And loved them both, even though the older son who had done everything right could not understand how the father could love someone as terrible as the younger son.

You know the story. There was an employer who paid the same wage to those who began working at 9am and those who showed up at 4pm.

Plot twist. This parable might not mean: self-righteous people bad; humble people good. (Humility is still a virtue, but maybe that's not the lesson this parable is holding up.) We might want a winner and a loser, but maybe God loves all of us.

David Lose says: "the parable ultimately escapes even its narrative setting and reveals that it is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly."³

This parable is about God. God whose name is love. God who is merciful beyond our wildest imaginations. God who is merciful to those we think should be punished, and God who is merciful to us.

We are all imperfect, and we all belong to God.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-2>

We are all human beings, and demonizing and othering is not what we're here for. We can hold up good, holy loving behavior, and we can call out cruelty and self-righteousness. But we can do that without saying anyone is beyond redemption, without dehumanizing. We can work for love and justice without descending into hatred. We can, though it's hard to do.

Now, yes, I think the traditional interpretation of this parable has important truth: self-righteousness and contempt are wrong; we *are* called to practice humility.

But this is equally true:

"Anytime you draw a line between who's "in" and who's "out," this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side"⁴ of that line from where you are.

Plot twist:

It's me, it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Amen.

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-2>