

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
23 October 2022

Luke 18:9-14

I have tended to be quite critical of Pharisees over the years. But I have forced myself to think about them a bit more fairly over the last few days. Pharisees of the time of Jesus tried very hard to obtain an education. When many of their friends were enjoying a care-free lifestyle, inspired by Hellenism, they were pouring over books, scriptures, and the commentaries of famous Rabbis. When their friends were using alcohol and cutting corners to get what they wanted, the Pharisees were deeply involved in prayer. When many were involved in pagan worship, fads, and cults, Pharisees were serious believers in the one God of Israel and his holy Law. They read the Jewish Scriptures daily, prayed several times a day, fasted, and attended Temple often. While many of their friends indulged in cultic prostitution at the pagan temples, they tried hard to have life-long marriages and frowned upon divorce. Many of them were honest people who struggled very hard to lead useful, holy, and righteous lives.

Pharisee believed that economic success provided people a certain level of respectability, which was holy and God-ordered. They believed God wanted his children to do well in life and to be showered with prosperity. For this reason, they worked hard to have a good home, to feed their children well, and to have all that was necessary for a prosperous life within their social class. As a Pharisee, you didn't want to be left behind. For them, economic prosperity showed the world that they obeyed the Law of Moses, known as the Torah. Central to this law was the commandments to have no other gods but God, to respect and honor his Holy Name, and to honor the Sabbath day. In addition to trying hard to do these, they took care of their parents because they believed a cultured man is responsible for the care of his family. A Pharisee's family was an extension of who he was, and if they were doing well, the world would know how well he was doing. Pharisees avoided murder, adultery, stealing, giving false testimony, and lusting over women other than their wives. They considered themselves righteous, and many chose to dedicate their lives to the service of God as temple authorities, teachers, lawyers, and Rabbis. They were the pillars of their community! They believed they had a patriotic duty to serve the nation and society in civil service. They saw themselves as responsible for ensuring that God's precepts and commandments were followed by all. They felt that without them, no one in the community could receive the benefits of the sacrificial life of the Temple. They saw themselves as indispensable to the life of the city, and they expected the respect and admiration that came with those duties and responsibilities.

Pharisees felt responsible for speaking on God's behalf and leading others into righteous and ethical lives. Yet, in the New Testament, they are often accused of being hypocrites who demanded of others a lifestyle they were incapable of leading themselves. They were concerned with appearances, and were often accused of being white-washed

tombs, clean and radiant on the outside, but decaying with dead bones on the inside. They built walls of separation between themselves and others they saw as violators of God's commandments. They were so concerned with judging others that they failed to see that if they were placed under the same microscope, they would have as many faults as others. They were often accused of leading double lives, like an actor, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. They were often accused of claiming God was on their side, making a mockery of God's law. They affirmed God had favorites, and loved those who obeyed him more than those who didn't go to Temple or followed the commandments.

These are serious charges. In fact, the beginning of this parable tells us that Jesus was addressing, "Some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." I think this is the point the story is trying to make: Contempt is the enemy. Feeling superior and better than others is a great danger. I believe many of these charges can be levied against us as well. We can't be too judgmental of the Pharisees. We must acknowledge that we too feel insulted when people who lead sinful lives suddenly have an attack of guilt, crying out to God in fear, asking for forgiveness, like the sinner in the story today. Some of us secretly resent how some people do whatever they want for years and then just cry out to God for mercy. I am familiar with these complaints because I was a prison chaplain for years. Many people are suspicious of jailhouse conversions. Most of us believe it is very easy and convenient to find Jesus in prison.

The Pharisee in our story today feels the same way. In his mind he says, "God is not a fool! God doesn't go for crocodile tears. How can this tax collector spend his whole life sinning and then come to Temple and cry out, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' Is it really that easy? Obviously not! He is a deluded man who thinks God loves sinners. But the righteous ones know differently, don't we? We know God is a God of order and not a God of disorder. This man is wasting his time looking for forgiveness and mercy. God will judge him and those like him severely when the last day comes."

Where did "some" of the Pharisees go wrong? Why are they so criticized in Scripture, when they set out to lead righteous, prosperous, and holy lives? First, we must make a distinction between the Jewish people today and the Pharisees who were Jesus' critics. These are two different groups of people. I believe the Pharisees of Jesus' day have two mathematical problems many of us have as well: First, they add two plus two and come up with seven. Let me explain. They are righteous, devoted, successful, well educated, and in positions of power. But they think that all they have is the result of their great efforts, their ingenuity, their industriousness, their high work ethic, and their devotion. Therefore, they give themselves the credit for their success. They believe that those who suffer deserve their suffering because God is punishing them for their unrighteousness. To them, blessings are a result of good works; curses are the result of evil works. Plain and simple! This is a two plus two equal seven equation. The Pharisees failed to see that all we have is a gift from God, who blesses us richly so that we may be a blessing to others. All we have is given to us in trust. We don't deserve it and, in many

cases, we haven't earned it. God blesses us that we may build his kingdom. Our wealth comes with responsibilities. There are obligations attached to our wealth.

Their second math problem starts with the same premise: "We have been blessed because God loves us," and then it adds a false premise, "Therefore we are better than the sinners. We need to separate ourselves from them. We need to declare them "unclean" and we need to isolate them to the periphery of our towns. We must not talk to them, relate to them, or acknowledge their existence or their need. We must avoid their eye contact." This is also a computational problem. They add two plus two and come up with nine. God loves them more because they have more than others, therefore they are better than others. They failed to see that you are not more because you have more and that those in need are God's beloved. The Pharisees worry too much about perceptions and reputations. They care too much about what constitutes honor and dishonor. In the meantime, they are failing to see God's face in the face of the stranger, the needy, the disenfranchised, and the lonely. They are so full of themselves that they have no room for God in their hearts. I think this problem applies to many in our world today as well!

It would be easy for me to preach about the evils of wealth, on the same week that we are starting the *In His Steps* campaign fully. But the issue with the Pharisees was one of a lack of stewardship. They failed to use their wealth for the benefit of others and they saw themselves as superior because they had more. I pray that you and I may think differently. This week as you receive a letter from me about 2023 stewardship, I want you to ask yourselves several questions: How has God blessed you? The second question is, what does he expect from you? Then I want you to think of ways you may be able to bless our vision for growth at Saint Dunstan's. We have done so much together! But God is not done with us yet. His kingdom is not yet built. There is much that remains undone. Please partner with us as we preach the Gospel with boldness, and as we continue to serve the people God has placed in our hands.

To finish this sermon, I want to remind you that it is okay to enjoy God's blessings and to use them to bless others, but don't for once think that because you have more you are worth more.

May God continue to bless you. Amen!