“The proud person always wants to do the right thing, the great thing. But because he wants to do it in his own strength, he is fighting not with (humanity), but with God,” Kierkegaard said.¹ That is our Pharisee from the parable in Luke’s gospel. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I tithe.” He was, as Mark Twain would say, “a good man in the worst sense of the word.” Good for what? Good for nothing.

Luke writes that Jesus told this parable to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt,” and makes the point that the Pharisee was standing by himself (probably to avoid ritual contamination). The tax collector, stood far off, no doubt thinking himself unworthy to enter the Temple. Pride is basically idolatry, forgetting that God is the Creator, and that we don’t create ourselves. C.S. Lewis described it like this: “A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”²

Jesus made The Pharisee a stereotyped figure when he told this parable. On the face of it this is about prayer, but is really about God’s love and mercy; it turned upside down the expectations of his listeners. They would have been shocked at painting the good guy, the Pharisee, as a bad guy; and painting the tax collector as a good guy. So we know to pay attention here.

Probably Jesus argued most with the Pharisees, or used them as a foil, because they were close to his position in many ways. They, too wanted people to be faithful, to live ethically, they believed in the resurrection, and took seriously the connection between life and faith. They developed under foreign occupation of Judea, preserving the faith under difficult conditions. Maybe Jesus thought they were at least redeemable.

He was doing all he should have – praying, fasting, and tithing. Perhaps Jesus was lampooning the traditional prayer of ancient Jewish men – “Thank you, God, for not making me a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.” The Pharisee was praying precisely the way the Talmudic tradition said to do. (Although what sort of religion depends on comparing itself to someone considered to be lesser?) He was worshiping the best way he knew how. But his privatized righteousness depended on being better than the tax collector. That was a pretty low bar, considering tax collectors of the day. So the Pharisee was the good guy, but he was good for nothing.

Tax collectors were not good guys; they collaborated with the Roman government, collecting taxes, but expected to be corrupt and skim as much extra as they could off the top. They stole from their own people. They were probably payday lenders. In truth, both men could have been equally humbled and embarrassed before God. But where the Pharisee didn’t know he should be humbled, the tax collector knew that his only shot at an unwasted life was to rely on God’s mercy. And Luke writes that he was the one who went home justified – and for nothing he did. His sins were very real and very serious, but he knew.
My favorite theologian, Kris Kristofferson, put it this way – “Lord help me Jesus, I wasted it so help me Jesus, I know what I am.” The tax collector went home justified not because he was good and the Pharisee bad, not because he had some emotional experience, but because he faced the truth and threw himself on God’s grace. People in 12-Step programs, who have hit bottom and started up, they know about this.

Jesus’ story doesn’t moralize, does not say what became of the tax collector, or if he was in any way changed, only that he went home justified. But we know that prayer can be a powerful thing. A prayer that honest and from the heart can change us. If his prayer for mercy was internalized, and he started to act out of it, I imagine that he became the answer to his own prayer – that he learned mercy and showed it.

Candler professor Roberta Bondi said that really the only thing the Pharisee did wrong was, “he passed judgment on the whole person of the tax collector, and with scorn dismissed him and his whole life as worthless.” And we are all in danger of that when we get caught up in the either-or paradigm. How many Presbyterians have I heard define the denomination with a negative – “Well, we’re not Baptists.” That’s not enough to say, is it? We need to be able to say something positive about who we are! And there is plenty to say.

The Pharisee’s error was that he forgot who it is from whom all blessings flow, as we sing every week. He thought he was blessed by his own actions. The verbs in his prayer were all in the first person. He’d been good, but he’d been good for nothing. The tax collector, on the other hand, had done nothing good at all, so he was totally at the mercy of God’s grace. So who really prayed to God? The one who knew himself for a sinner. Religion doesn’t save. God does. Over 1,500 years ago, Cyril of Alexandria wrote of the Pharisee in this parable, “He says, ‘I am not as the rest of humankind.’ Moderate yourself, O Pharisee. Put a door and lock on your tongue. You speak to God who knows all things. Wait for the decree of the judge!”

A God who only blesses the pious is a god we can manipulate, with our prayers and our behavior. That is a god we have power over. That doesn’t sound like the God of scripture. We receive grace in spite of ourselves, not because of ourselves.

It is when sin finds forgiveness that we know from whom all blessings flow. When Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, he laid a trap for all of us who hear it. He draws us in to passing judgment on the Pharisee, the judger. And when we do, we become the Pharisee. We do it the moment we say, “Well thank God I’m not like that Pharisee! I don’t judge anybody!” In a way it is self-fulfilling prophecy, and the Pharisee and the tax collector each got the God they believed in.

Diana Butler Bass, a keen observer of the American religious scene, sees a couple of major modes of operating, for congregations. Some subscribe to the either/or, and have conviction that they have the truth, others are wrong, and must convert. Others operate more as “schools for sinners”, knowing we all are frail and flawed and in need of grace.
The parable in Luke is a “...polar reversal of human judgment,” Dominic Crossan writes, “even or especially of religious judgment, whereby the Kingdom forces its way into human awareness. What, in other words, if God does not play by our rules?”

Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from a Roman prison. At that point of his life Paul could write: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. There is reserved for me a crown of righteousness the Lord will give to me, and not only to me, but to all who wait for his appearing...the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack.” Paul sounds confident and full of faith in this passage, and at first blush it may sound as if he is as cocky as the Pharisee. But notice that, aside from a dig at Alexander the Coppersmith, Paul did not build himself up at other’s expense, nor did he lose faith. He would have described the Pharisee’s exhibition as “works righteousness.”

Paul’s statement of confidence in God’s mercy did not come from the comfort of the Temple, as did the Pharisee’s. It came from the harsh confines of a Roman prison. Certainly Paul knew that he would die soon, beheaded by the Empire (they didn’t crucify Roman citizens).

When we know any status at all that we have comes from God, we will look at our neighbor with forgiveness and grace. Calvin said it half a millennia ago. Any good thing we have comes from God, and sometimes we feel it move in us. Sometimes we are privileged to let it use us. On this Reformation Sunday, we might remember John Calvin, the progenitor of the theological tradition “Reformed”, to which Presbyterians belong. But as Princeton theologian William Stacy Johnson points out, Calvin would be appalled at people clinging to a hidebound tradition of Calvin-ISM, rather than following a God who may call us to go where we did not foresee and be what we did not imagine. The opening line of Calvin’s great work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion, says “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and proper wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” Johnson writes that his intimate link between God and ourselves “means that the only authentic way to know ourselves is to be in relationship to God. It also means that knowing God enable us to see ourselves as we truly are.” To be “Reformed” is to be honest in the face of holiness, and willing to be transformed, changed. It is to know that we none of us self-sufficient, but totally dependent on grace.

Unlike either of the characters in the parable, God asks from us neither self-abasement nor arrogant pride. It is not a question of us working to be good for something instead of good for nothing. We will not be able to keep from being gracious if we have a deep awareness that grace has come to us undeserved. And in that prayer for God’s grace to come to us, in the end we will become the answer to our own prayer, and the answer to someone else’s.

Alabama songwriter Pierce Pettis, has a take on the tax collector’s prayer: “I am nothing, but the angels sometimes whisper in my ear. They tell me things, and then they disappear. Though I am nothing, I sometimes like to make believe I hear.”
Self-justification is hollow. And we live in a world constantly pushing us to justify ourselves – earn approval, create the resume that gets the job, reach performance criteria or sales quotas, meet some abstract definition of success, get there at someone else’s expense, or be “cool” on Facebook. The world demands proofs. But the undeserving tax collector went down the hill vindicated. If God loves you, what else do you have to prove, ever?

May you know blessing from the Giver of all blessings; and the angels whisper in your ear.

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5. Cyril of Alexandria, *Homily 120*