



Pastor Robyn Hogue

## SERMON

# If You Think You're a Saint, You Aint!

Luke 18:9-14

October 16, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

Jerusalem was built on top of a mountain and the temple was set on a high point in the city. It was a fitting location for the temple of God; its location said something about the holiness of God. Wherever you might be, you had to *look up* to see the temple, and you had to literally *go up* to get there.

Jesus begins, “Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector,” (v. 10) meaning that both these men left their homes and walked up to the temple to worship. Imagine with me the scene, the Pharisee is a person who is confident in his place in the community. He’s probably among those who greet others openly as he makes his way. The tax collector is like the person who wonders if they can get in and get out of worship without too much notice. Have you been in that place where you knew you had messed up and wanted to go to church, but didn’t want anyone to ask you what was going on. Maybe you took your place in the back of the sanctuary just wanting to feel God’s presence, maybe even wondering if God wanted you there at all. That’s what it would have been like for this tax collector.

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed in what I imagine to have been a commanding and public voice, “God, I thank You that I am not like the rest of these losers...even like this tax collector,” as he pointed to the shame filled soul praying in the back of the sanctuary.

Then this Pharisee bragged about all the habits that made him superior. He fasted more often than required and gave lots of money to the temple. He could have gone on and on, because he was Mr. Good Citizen personified. I imagine him to have been a good father and a good husband. He probably paid his debts, and paid them on time. He studied the scriptures and worshipped religiously. He was a proud man, but he had good reason to be proud.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was not bragging. He had compromised himself by working with “the enemy.” He collected the very taxes that Rome used to finance its occupying armies in Israel. By doing so he helped the Romans keep his countrywomen, children and men under their heel. It was a dirty job—but it paid well.

The tax collector went to a far corner of the temple where he could be alone in his burden. He could not even look up to heaven, as was the custom of those days. He was ashamed and he had good reason to be ashamed. Head down and spirit broken he prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13) Jesus said, “I tell you, this man, this tax collector, went down to his house justified rather than the (Pharisee); for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (v. 14)

We love the story. We love it because there is something in us that likes to see the mighty braggarts brought low while we witness the ordinary underdog win! We love the story because we too feel ordinary and we resent the person who is not ordinary—the person who has it all. “Serves him right!” we say, “Serves her right!”

We love the story. But the people to whom Jesus first told the story did not love it. Jesus told this story to “certain people who were convinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others.” (v.9) Those people had much in common with the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable and understood that Jesus was making His point at their expense. They hated the story... and they might have hated Jesus for telling it.

Yet we need to be thoughtful about Jesus’ parables because if we’re not careful, we will find Him making His point at our expense. Jesus did not give us parables to entertain us or to make us feel good. Jesus did not give us parables as short stories to remember because we are no good at remembering long stories. Jesus gave us parables to bring us closer to God.

Moving closer to God can, at times, be painful; moving closer to God can requires us to change our ways. Jesus gave us parables to call us to spiritual growth, to change our hearts and the direction of our lives—and that almost always requires effort.

Let’s look at this parable again. The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank You that I am not like the rest of these—even like this tax collector.” That prayer was full of pride; it was full of self. The Pharisee was so full of self that he had no space left in his heart to receive God’s mercy. So he experienced no mercy.

Let me repeat that, because it’s important! The Pharisee was so full of himself that he had no space left in his heart to receive God’s mercy. So he experienced no mercy.

“Whew!” we say. “Thank God, I am not like...this Pharisee.” Isn’t that the same prayer that got the Pharisee into trouble? Ouch. Now we feel hook at the end of Jesus’ parable because most of Jesus’ parables have a hook in them somewhere. We are always glad when the hook snags “the bad guys.” But, when we hear the parable clearly, it might snag us as well.

The Pharisee’s problem was that he felt no need of God’s mercy and so he could experience no mercy. The Pharisee’s problem was that he felt no need of God’s forgiveness so he did not experience God’s forgiveness. The Pharisee’s problem was that he was such a good person (at least as compared with the tax collector) that the Pharisee could measure himself against the sinfulness of the tax collector and feel six feet tall.

Yet, this parable teaches us not to measure ourselves against the sinfulness of the Pharisee...or the local gossip...or the town drunk...or the compromised politician. This parable teaches us to measure ourselves against the holiness of God. When we do that, we will see that we might be an inch taller than the other person, but we all fall short of the glory of God and are miles short of the holiness of God.

God created us to be holy—as God is holy. We have missed the mark, not by a little, but by a lot. We cannot pray, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” We can only pray, “God, be merciful to me, a mess-up.” That’s the message of this parable.

That’s why we come here today; we come to ask for and to receive the mercy of God. We have sinned, we have messed up and we come to be forgiven. We have failed and we come to ask God for help. We are broken and we come to God for mending. When we come to God for mercy, God gives us mercy. When we come to God for forgiveness, God forgives us. When we come broken, God gives us mending. The Good News is that our relationship with God does not depend on our perfection. It depends on what Christ did for us on the cross. And that’s our Good News.

Let me share a true story with you. The Russian novelist Yevtushenko was born in 1933. He tells of his memory of something that took place when he was eight years old. The Germans had invaded Russia, had killed millions of Russians, and would kill millions more. But sometimes they lost a battle, and Yevtushenko, as a child, had a chance to see defeated Germans face to face. He wrote: "In 1941, Mama took me back to Moscow. There I saw our enemy for the first time. If my memory is right, nearly 20,000 German war prisoners were to be marched in a single column through the streets of Moscow.

"The pavements swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd were mostly women. Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick and thin hunched shoulders which had borne half the burden of the war. Every one of them must have a father or a husband or brother or a son killed by the Germans.

"They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear. At last we saw it.

"The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over their plebian victors....

"The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and policemen had all they could do to hold them back.

"But all at once something happened to them.

"They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, bloodstained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down.

"The street became dead silent—the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches.

"Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying: "Let me through." There must have been something about her that made him step aside.

"She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now suddenly from every side women were running towards the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, apples, whatever they had.

"The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people."

The response of that crowd to the German soldiers mirrors that of God to the Pharisee and the tax collector. The generals at the front of the march offended people with their arrogance. They asked no mercy and experienced none. The foot soldiers further back were a different story. They were broken, beaten souls and, as such, they received mercy.

So it is with us. When we are riding high, smug and self-satisfied, we feel no need of grace and receive none. Just as water runs off sun-baked clay, so also God's grace washes over us without effect. But our seasons of brokenness remind us of our need and prepare us to receive God's grace. This is our Good News and Gospel!