

**The Two Who Went Up to Pray**  
**Sermon Preached by Gordon Stewart**  
**January 15, 2006**  
**Scripture: Luke 18:8-17**

There was a time when I was sure I knew the identity of the man who gave thanks that he was not like the sinner. I had met him many times. I knew him well. He was the one whose exemplary righteousness caused him to stand in judgment of others who were not as good as he. He did all the right things – a religious man, a moral man, a good man by every standard.

I had met him many times. And one thing I knew – I was not him! He was full of answers. He was sure about his relationship with God. He knew what God required of him and cared about it so much that he exceeded what was required. His spiritual life was a religious life, but not a life of faith. The religious life was a matter of dos and don'ts. It was a life lived not so much in trust as it was in fear of making a mistake, committing a sin, getting on God's wrong side.

As a third grader, I knew the man who gave thanks that he was not like this poor sinner as Mr. Wardle, the Principal of Marple Elementary School in Broomall, Pennsylvania, who wrongly accused me of cursing on the playground. I had said "darn". But Sammy Peacock, who was no friend of mine, was a playground safety with an enforcer's badge – a kind of elementary school sheriff's deputy patrolling the playground for suspected criminals, Mr. Wardle's eyes and ears, Mr. Wardle's playground wiretap, the enforcer of goodness – Sammy had reported me to Mr. Wardle for saying not 'darn' but...well, you know... 'damn'.

Now Sammy was the one person at Marple School with whom I had ever fought. Before he had been appointed to the high office of Safety Patrol, Sammy and I had trashed around in a mud puddle with fists flying until some other Safety had broken it up. But neither of us ever forgot. Now *Sammy* was part of the Sheriff's playground posse. It was payback time. So he made up a story that Mr. Wardle took as gospel truth. The minister's kid had cursed! He was guilty!

Now it didn't matter that I had never said that word in my life – it wasn't even in my vocabulary...until after Mr. Wardle, a member of the Marple Presbyterian Church where my father was the minister, assumed I was guilty of profanity, condescended to tell me that it would be "our little secret" and warned me that if I were ever caught again using such language, he would have to tell me father! At which point I think I considered using the forbidden word for the first time – not out loud, of course, but to my wrongfully convicted self.

As a child, as a youth and through much of my adulthood, the man who gave thanks in the temple was a man like that. As a deputy of heaven, he saw it as his responsibility in the world to be the enforcer, the paragon of virtue. He was a stern man who didn't curse,

didn't smoke and didn't chew. He was a righteous man who threatened hell to those who were sinners. "I thank you, God, that I am not like others, like this poor sinner."

For years the man in the temple was somebody else. It was the likes of Mr. Wardle. Until one day I realized that *I was giving thanks* that I was not like Mr. Wardle.

Now, after eight years at the Legal Rights Center, I see myself in each of the two figures in Jesus' parable. And I realize that the man who gave thanks that he was not like others is much more like me than he is Pharisee I as I had imagined him. Let me explain what I mean and see if we can't find ourselves reflected in his spirituality.

In order to understand this Pharisee, it's important to locate him in time and place – a time and place not unlike our own. First, he was a Pharisee. Now I ask you to put aside the stereotype of the Pharisee this morning. Many biblical scholars believe that Jesus himself was a Pharisee. In the world of Jesus the Pharisees were those who refused to collaborate with the imperial power, but they also refused to become insurgents. Rome occupied their land, the way we now occupy Iraq. And there were those who were later called 'publicans' – like the other man in Jesus' parable – who became Rome's bill collectors. The Publicans were turncoats – citizens of an occupied land who collaborated with the occupying power to collect its taxes. Not only did the Publicans collect Rome's taxes, they often extorted money the way the Mafia or a gang in our country forces payoffs for protection in the ghettos of America. The Pharisees, by contrast, were upright people who detested this behavior. Phariseeism was a lay movement that embodied a commitment to spiritual authenticity and social justice. And THIS Pharisee not only fulfills the law of fasting when it is required – several times a year during major feasts and festivals! He fasts twice a week to remember the poor! And he not only tithes on agricultural produce – which is all the religious law required of him. He gives away 10 percent on all that he gets. His religious life is not trivial. It is costly. And so the Pharisee goes up to the temple to pray. He was quite clear that the way to love the Lord your God was to love your neighbor as yourself. "I thank you, God, that I am not like these others – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

If, in certain ways the Pharisee in Jesus' parable sounds a bit like us, there's a reason. He is the one to object to the cozy relationship between religion and the state. He is the one who stands up for the widow, the orphan, the sojourner – the people on MFIP, the people without medical insurance. He is the one who stands against injustice in any of its forms. He is the one who stands against violence - the way of the occupying forces, on the one hand, and of the Sicarii, the dagger-carrying guerilla insurgents who opposed Roman occupation by force, on the other. He is the one who is most suspicious about political authority and power. And yet he does not retreat to the shores of the Dead Sea like the Essenes; he stays in the city. He takes his place in the midst of the fray. He is the one most critical of the likes of Halliburton and Enron and other parasites who get rich by attaching themselves to the military-industrial complex and leave workers without pensions. The Pharisee is also the advocate of democracy – opposing the religious elites (the Sadducees) and those who held power by making deals with Rome (the Herodians). He is the one who sees the hypocrisy of one nation exporting what it claims to be its

superior way of life under the rule of law to the rest of world while the leaders of that same nation threaten that same rule of law by violating the Constitution on which that way of life depends. He is a man of integrity, a man of peace who calls for justice in the name of the Lord. He could easily be a Presbyterian. He is right, and he is proud of it!!!

Years after I concluded that I had met the Pharisee in Mr. Wardle's office, I have come ever so painfully and ever so slowly to a different conclusion. I have come to see that I am the Pharisee!

At the same time, experience has taught me what it means to be a sinner begging for mercy. Life has taught me that the gospel is about grace, not law. For if the law were the measure of our worth or our salvation, if the law were the source on which our spiritual healing depended, our hope would be as barren as Sara was before the grace brought the possibility of new life to her aged womb. We do not have it within us to produce our own goodness. Goodness and worth come only as gifts from our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

And so it is that Jesus declared that the publican – the extortioner and collaborator, the one whose life was anything but 'good' – went down to his house justified rather than the Pharisee. Because he knows himself to be broken, he cries out for grace. He beats his chest. His eyes are down. He cries out for mercy. "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

All of us in the Presbyterian Church would do well to pay more attention to this parable. We look awfully convinced that we know what is right and what is good. Sometimes we look to the world like the very people to whom Jesus told this parable. He composed this parable for the likes of me. "He told this parable," says Luke, "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." And our prayers sometimes have the flavor of self-congratulation. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable "stood and prayed thus with himself." He isn't really talking with God. He's in the temple, but he might as well be throwing a party for himself. He stands apart. He stands alone. We, too, pride ourselves for standing apart from others – the uninformed, the prejudiced, the homophobic, the racist, the religious right. We forget that being right or being good is not the stuff of the Christian life. Love, not goodness, is the stuff of the Christian life. Which is why Jesus objected to those who called him 'good' – "Why do you call me good?" he asked. "Only God is good!" Why don't you give it up?

Let me conclude with a story from the life of Thomas Merton. Merton is the monk whose advocacy for the peace and justice was beyond reproach. Here's the story.

The Trappist monastery in Gethsemane, Kentucky had become a magnet for people seeking a deeper spirituality. Its light drew people from everywhere. It was a good place, a beacon of justice and peace in a dark world.

When people would come to Gethsemane seeking admission to the community, the Abbot would invite the inquirers to meet with the monks of Gethsemane. They would gather in a circle where the Abbott would break the code of silence with a simple

question: “Why have you come here? What are you seeking?” Interesting question, don’t you think? It assumes that all of us are seeking. Not that we’ve found something, but that we’re in search for something. “Why have you come here? What are you seeking?” asked the Abbott. And there was only one answer appropriate for admission to the community of Gethsemane. It was not “I want to be a better person.” It was not “I want to closer to God.” It was not “I want to fight for justice and peace.” It was not “I want to deepen my spiritual life.” It was not “I want a more peaceful life.” The answer the community was looking for was simple: “I seek mercy! I seek mercy! I seek mercy!”

The good news of the gospel is that the mercy we seek has already found us!

Let us pray.

We come to this place because your mercy has sought us and found us. We come as grateful beggars with no entitlement to such grace. We kneel as those who trust not in the works of human righteousness but in the works of your grace alone - your welcome, your forgiveness, your mercy, your cross, your resurrection, your Divine Spirit crying within us with sighs too deep for manicured words. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy upon us...and we shall be well. Amen.