

Humility  
Luke 18:9-14  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
October 23, 2016 / 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Today's selection is the Parable of the Pharisee & the Tax Collector, which is an example story, like the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Now, the Pharisees are who later become the Rabbis, which is the majority form of Judaism today. Not all Pharisees were like this, and the Talmud has many examples of humble Pharisees. However, the Talmud also has the prayer of the rabbi, dated to about 40 years after the Crucifixion, which shows great spiritual pride on their part.

Pride and humility are the key issues in Jesus' lesson for us today. Jesus starts off by addressing this lesson to a specific type of person: Those who think themselves as better than others and act on that belief, the overly prideful. We all know the type. Like Maggie Smith's character on Downton Abbey, the Dowager Countess, distinguishing between people and the right type of people.

Jesus' example is a Pharisee who went up to the Temple to pray, and he thanks God that he is not like other certain types of people, including the tax collector who also went up to the Temple to pray. He bragged to God that he fasts and tithes, so he thinks that he better than other people, holier too. The example of righteousness, that in reality, makes him no longer holy, no longer righteous, no longer an example for the believers; because of his pride in his own holiness and because of his judgmental elitism.

This type of person is one of many reasons why I dislike reality television; but it seems to be the type that producers love, because it causes drama for ratings. The type that I do occasionally watch are the artistic competitions that are based on merit. And unfortunately, you can see this type of person there as well.

This past week, Kyla had been binge watching one about painting, and while I was really wasn't paying attention, I still noticed one contestant was different from most of the rest. Most of the contestants mutually supported each other, and mutually admired the skills of each other, even.

But not one woman. She was so sure of her own superiority, and she let everyone know it. Not just in the one-on-one interviews, but to her fellow contestants. In one episode, she said something that made me stop what I was doing. Everyone was paired up for a team challenge, and she said to her peer and partner that she was so happy to have an assistant who knows how to paint!

Now, she felt that she was genuinely offering her partner a compliment; in her mind, she was being kind; but of course, it was not received that way. It was received as the belittling comment that it was. Can you imagine the ego, pride, and audacity to say something like that to a peer?

Or take the example of the story of the Tortoise and the Hare. The Hare was sure that he was going to win, that his pride led him to make mistakes.

Then, Jesus pointed to the tax collector as the exemplar of true righteousness, which would sound weird to anyone listening to Jesus, because tax collectors were not looked kindly on in any way, and were hated in the community, and seen as traitors, because they worked for the Roman occupiers. Well, this tax collector was described as “standing far off,” which was a euphemism in that time for standing far away from the altar, but still within the Temple, due to a sense of ones own unworthiness. So, instead of prideful bragging to God, he was contrite, confessing to God that he is a sinner, fully self-aware, and so he was humble.

This was why he was the one that Jesus pointed to as justified, a truly righteous person, because of his humility.

The New Testament and many famous theologians have a lot to say about humility as a core concept to Christianity. After all, Jesus did declare: “Blessed are the Meek.”

The Apostle Peter, in his Letter, held up the example of Jesus' submission to unjust persecution as an example of righteous humility. The Apostle James, in his Letter, spoke of how humility is the proper recipient of God's grace, as God opposes the proud.

So, what does humility look like? In a religious sense, it is a submission to God & legitimate authority, a recognition of one's own limits, and a recognition of the virtues and talents that others possess.

A common example and application of this at a church can be found with the church's programming and volunteers. Say a volunteer does something, donating their time and talent to our church community, but they don't do it the way you would do it. Which is the humble path that Jesus would advocate? Is the humble response to compliment their work and thank them for giving of themselves; or is it to stop them, critically judge their work, and reject their gift? That latter path of pride-fullness is how you ensure that the volunteer no longer volunteers.

Jesus ends the Parable with one of His sayings, summing up the whole Parable: "...All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." He is contrasting the behavior and character of the Pharisee against the Tax Collector, and foretelling their destinies in the life to come.

How about the ending of the Tortoise and Hare story? The Tortoise acted humbly and just kept on going, slow & steady wins the race, right? The Hare was not humble and his pride caused him to lose the race. The Tortoise was exalted and the Hare humbled.

And there is the ending of the story of the prideful person from the artistic competition I mentioned earlier. She was frequently ranked at the bottom, but somehow kept squeaking through to the next round. Surprisingly, that did not give her a wake up call, and when it came time to decide who would move on to the finale, her pride was ramped up even more, so sure she was the best and was going to win it all.

The two people already chosen for the finale were the most humble people in competition, and the prideful woman was in a paint-off for the last spot against the competitor she had targeted the most, who was also a very humble woman. Well, the prideful woman was not exalted as she expected she would be, but was brought low when she lost to the one she had targeted.

But it didn't end there! Now, all three finalists, like I mentioned earlier, were humble people who recognized their limitations and recognized the skills and talents of their peers. Many competitions have a villain, but not here. The three were good & humble people. So, the prideful woman, by random chance, ended up working for the humble woman she targeted. And then the humble woman was exalted when she won the whole competition.

Not only were the humble blessed, they were exalted to the top three positions. And a humble person, who was targeted and abused, was more blessed and exalted, as Jesus' summation of the Parable tells us would happen. How often does that happen on a reality show? I see it as a perfect example!

I am going to end today with some words on humility by C. S. Lewis from *Mere Christianity*: “[A humble person] will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for Jesus' lesson for us today. May we remember the examples of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, that we should not let pride run & ruin ourselves, nor be boastful, because that is how we lose our righteousness, which is maintained on the humble path, full of love and faith, confident in the knowledge that You will reward us. May we take this lesson to heart, so that it is no longer a conscious thought, but an instinctual action. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

O God, You invite us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers as dear to us as our own needs. Loving our neighbors as ourselves, we offer our thanksgivings, our confessions, and our petitions on behalf of the church and the world.

We give You thanks for all the ways that you bless our lives: the beauty and abundance of nature, the love of family and friends, the joy of knowing You and hearing Your word.

We ask for Your forgiveness. We recognize that we live in a broken world, and we can always do more. We boast of our greatness, or squander time and gifts, or flaunt our power, or forget to love our neighbors. We pray that we may have the opportunities to right any wrongs we have knowingly or unknowingly committed.

We pray for our neighbors. We ask for comfort to those in distress. We ask for wellness to those unwell in mind, body, or spirit. We ask for refuge for those uprooted by fire, flood, or famine. We ask for justice for those who are victims of violence, and their families. We pray for wisdom for those who make decisions that effect many lives. We pray for safety for those who risk their lives for others. We also ask that You guide the hands of those who are in a position to use their gifts to help others.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, and for Your strength of spirit to do what is right, and to act generously towards all, full of Christ's Love. We offer to You, the prayers of our hearts, both silent and spoken, confident that You will hear them and respond.

We especially pray for:

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to You, that we all may be one with You, as You are one with us in Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

## Psalm 65

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come. When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple. By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

## Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 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."