

Trinity 11

I take as my text today St. Luke's Gospel passage that begins:

JESUS spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

While seemingly about prayer, the parable we read today from St. Luke's Gospel is, more to the point, an exposé on the “sin of pride,” and an appeal to humility. Here, we are confronted with extremes, not just social, Pharisee versus Publican, but also religious, pride versus humility.

In this parable, Jesus exposes not just the pride, but also the vanity, arrogance, and self-confidence of the Pharisee, and in relating it to modern times, it includes, perhaps, many of today's Christians, more especially a number of the Church leadership across all denominations.

Perhaps, when Jesus delivered this parable, He had in mind not just the Pharisees but also some of His disciples whose temperament was beginning to mimic that of the Pharisees.

Here, we have depicted two diametrically opposed members of the Jewish community: the Pharisee and the Publican.

The Pharisee, devoted to the practice of religion, represented the wealthy class of Jews. Being very pious, he was bound up in adhering to every aspect of the Law.

The religion of the Pharisee has been described as two-fold: first, abstaining from injustice to others, that is, to live a harmless, innocent, and upright life; and, second, a regular observance of all the external duties of religion.

Unfortunately, for so many of the Pharisees, the actual practice of their religion was more of a façade.

For example: Throughout the New Testament, we see evidence that the Pharisees themselves ignored the spirit of the Law; rather, they were more interested in seeing that others adhered to the Law in its minutia. Thus, they challenged Jesus many times for failing to comply to the strict constructs of the Law.

In this particular story, the Pharisee takes special pride in his tithing, that he tithes not just of what is required but includes all that he possesses or acquires. He takes special pride in his fasting, that he not only fasts as required but goes beyond by fasting twice each week on Mondays and Thursdays.

We could go on but I think you get the point on the temperament of the Pharisee, and his assessment of himself, his pride, his aloofness.

The Publican, on the other hand, was what could be referred to as a “renegade Jew,” who worked as a tax collector for the Romans. Essentially, they were public contractors managing the collection of taxes, providing supplies, and overseeing the construction of public buildings. The chief collectors also had wealth and political influence but were considered to be corrupt and despised by the Pharisees.

It is interesting to note that two of the disciples, Levi, who became Matthew, and Zacchaeus, or Matthias, had been tax collectors, Publicans. According to Clement of Alexandria, in his book *Stromata*, Zacchaeus was called Matthias by the apostles, and took the place of Judas Iscariot after the ascension of our Lord.

With that background, we turn to the Parable where we find the Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple, each offering their prayers.

One more detail: the customary stance for prayer was to stand upright, feet side by side, and eyes fixed downward. Thus, in this posture, the eyes would be toward the earth, and the heart open above toward heaven. The left hand would be over the heart, and the right hand placed upon the left. There one would stand as a servant before his Master.

But, in this instance, the Pharisee has set himself apart from the others, and takes a prideful stance.

Perhaps he sees the Publican out of the corner of his eye, and doesn't want to be anywhere near to him. There was a fear among Pharisees that by standing too close to someone such as a Publican, they could become polluted.

Here we may note that prayer was offered in the Court of Women, and the Pharisee would be standing on the side nearest the Temple, while the Publican would be standing as far from the Temple as possible, while still remaining in the Court of Women.

Thus, the Pharisee stood and prayed. It is in a voice for all to hear that he offers his prayer:

God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are,
extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.
I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I
possess.

While the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

One has gone to boast to God of his own righteousness; he was giving a testimonial of himself before God; his prayer was not to God but with himself.

The other has gone not to boast but to seek forgiveness.

One has gone before God full of himself and his own goodness, not thinking to ask for the favor and grace of God.

The other has gone before God full of humility and repentance.

Now the parable comes to light, focusing on our posture, not only in prayer but in our lives as Christians.

First, when we go before God in prayer, it must come from the heart. We must humble ourselves before him.

Second, in the world, the externals by which we are recognized must be governed by what is within our hearts.

For the Pharisees, religion was their life; but that religion was also a façade.

As Christians, our religion should also be our life; it should not be a façade.

While others may judge us by externals, God judges us by what is in our hearts. However our lives may compare with those around us, no matter how righteous we may think we are, the real question is: when we set our lives beside Jesus, how do we compare?

If we should learn anything from the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, it is that what matters with God is not what others can see, or how we may imagine ourselves to be, but what He sees in us, in our hearts.

Is it love, compassion, patience, and understanding? Are we a reflection of the love that God has for us?

Are our daily lives governed by what is in our hearts, being open above to heaven?

In prayer, do we approach God in humility, remembering that the gate of heaven is set in such fashion that none can enter except on their knees?

For us human beings, the pinnacle of God's Creation, humility, true humility, is found in keeping one's accomplishments, talents and abilities, in proper perspective, aware of one's own self worth, while valuing the welfare and worth of others, not deprecation but deference to others, while maintaining a quiet self-confidence.

Humility is coming before God in prayer, emulating the example set by the Publican, God be merciful unto me a sinner, acknowledging our humanity, and seeking forgiveness and strength to do better in our lives.

With love and compassion, God bestows freely his Grace and mercy to such who seek him.