

**Praying with a Sideward Glance**  
**Luke 18:9-14**  
**Second Baptist Church, Memphis**  
**October 28, 2007**  
**Dr. Brent Beasley**

A rabbi, a priest, and a Muslim Imam get into a three-car accident. All three cars are totally demolished, but amazingly none of the ministers are hurt. After they each crawl out of their cars, they see that all three of them are clergy. Each is wearing the clothing of his faith.

*Father, Rabbi – how are you? Were you hurt?* said the Imam.

*How amazing that we would all be men of faith,* said the rabbi. *Our cars are totaled but we are not hurt. This must be a sign from God.*

*Yes, this must mean that we are meant to be friends,* said the Imam.

*Yes,* said the priest. *God must want us to come together and bring our communities together in peace. And look!* the priest continued. *Another miracle! The bottle of wine I was taking to the bishop didn't break. Surely God wants us to drink this wine together and celebrate our good fortune. Even you, Imam. Surely God wants all three of us to celebrate our newfound union.*

And he took the bottle and opened it and handed it to the imam and the rabbi who each took a swig. When they handed the bottle back to the priest, he placed the cork back into the bottle and set it down.

*Aren't you having any?* asked the rabbi and the imam.

*No, I think I'll wait for the police to get here,* the priest said.

There are countless jokes that start something like that one: a priest and a rabbi walk into a bar... something like that.

Our scripture lesson for this morning is not a joke, but it sounds a kind of like one: a Pharisee and a tax collector walk into a temple . . .

Actually this story – like last week's story – is another parable. A parable is actually very similar to a joke. It's not something that literally happened, but Jesus told parables in order to jolt his listeners with the unexpected and teach them something about God and God's kingdom.

Like a joke, parables surprise us with the unexpected. They offer a little twist that we weren't expecting. They involve a little bit of thinking. Some jokes even make us angry. The parables of Jesus made many people angry because they called into question the behavior and piety that most people considered acceptable in those days.

Robert Farrar Capon says: *Like all of Jesus' parables, this one should carry a warning which is "this will be hazardous to all your previous opinions about how religion works and how God works." Jesus' parables are designed to outrage the hearers and to shock and to show how God has stood almost all of our values on their heads.*

Maybe you've heard this one... A Pharisee and a tax collector walk into a temple. One, a pious, devout religious person, the

Pharisee, prayed, *God, I thank thee that I am not like other people—extortioners, murderers, adulterers—or like this tax collector. I fast, I pray, I tithe all I have.*

The tax collector could hardly even pray. He beat upon his chest crying, *Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Then Jesus says, *I tell you this man (the tax collector) went to his house justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

What Jesus doesn't mention in his parable is that, before he went to the temple to pray, the Pharisee got up that Sunday morning with his family, read the paper, ate breakfast, had his own prayer time, helped his wife get the kids ready for Sunday School, went to church, had some doughnuts, and taught his Sunday School class all before he went to the sanctuary to pray. And that when he prayed there were tears in his eyes. He was truly grateful to God for the blessings in his life.

We Christians have been on Jesus' side for so long that we've lost most of the respect we might have had for the Pharisees. *[Thanks to the Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade, former Rector of St. Albans Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C., for making this point in a sermon preached August 31, 2003]*

Do you remember that I said one time in a sermon that I think in the Gospels the Pharisees are like the Washington Generals?

Remember the Washington Generals? They are the opponent for the Harlem Globetrotters (I think they've changed their name now to the Nationals). For over fifty years, the

Washington Generals have been losing to the Globetrotters—they've lost about 15,000 games. They won once—in 1971. And they've now lost 10,000 games in a row since then.

Here's the thing, of course: the Washington Generals are not supposed to win. They are just there so the real stars can show their stuff. When the Globetrotters are throwing the ball in under the basket, they throw the ball off the back of one of the Generals' head, step in bounds, catch it, and make an easy lay up. It's the Generals who look silly as they chase the Globetrotters around in circles. They serve as a foil for the Globetrotters.

So I said one time that sometimes it seems like in the Gospels the Pharisees are the Washington Generals—just cannon fodder for Jesus and the good guys, not supposed to win, just there so the real stars can show their stuff.

The Pharisees are not the Washington Generals. The Pharisees are not fools. The Pharisees are the religious ones who try as hard as they possible can to live a good life, they go to Sunday School and Worship every week, they come on Wednesday nights, they don't hang out in seedy places, they try to raise their kids right, they watch their language, they try hard to have a regular time in their lives for prayer and reading the scripture. Sound familiar?

The parable also neglects to point out that the tax collector, when he has wiped his eyes, blown his nose and gone home, will not be quitting his shady tax collecting job. He can't see any options; it's a nasty business, but he's stuck in it. Tomorrow he'll again take money from his neighbors, hand some of it over to the empire and put some aside for himself.

The tax collector is not a hero. He is a traitor, collecting taxes for Rome from his own people. He is a reprehensible character, religiously unclean, a political turncoat.

To see the tax collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a creep ruins the story. It makes it false, and it sends us right into the trap that we can fall into when we read this story and preach about this story. It sends us straight into the trap of saying, *God, we thank you that we are not like this Pharisee!*

We will have wasted our time here this morning if we leave this sanctuary congratulating ourselves that we are not like the Pharisee.

Better to see the Pharisee as he is—a thoroughly decent, generous, committed man—the kind of person that most of want to be—and to see the tax collector as a compromised, certified bad guy.

I know which character our church depends on. I know which one pays the bills, teaches the lesson, visits the sick, feeds the hungry, volunteers in the nursery. We need a churchful of people with the Pharisee's commitments—people who care enough to be serious about their religious obligations, people who tithe on all their income and who thank God that they can.

As in Jesus, day, it's people like the Pharisee who hold the community together and keep the faith. We can't color him sinister. He's not some bad guy in a choir robe. He's a better man than I am, and probably better than you.

But there is a word in his prayer that gets him in trouble, and that one little word gives him away. He doesn't give thanks that

God has spared him from being a thief, rogue, adulterer or tax collector; he gives thanks that he is not like them. *God, I thank you that I am not like other people . . .*

Paul Duke, who at one time was Pastor at Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, talks about the sideward glance of prayer, and I'm indebted to him for this idea.

[Paul Duke, "Praying with a Sideward Glance", *The Christian Century*, October 11, 1995]

*God, I thank you that I am not like other people.* Really? That's where the Pharisee crosses the line from the grammar of gratitude into the grammar of elitism. It can be a very subtle line, and we almost never notice when we cross it, but we do it all the time. What betrays us is an unexamined refusal of kinship. *God, I thank you that I am not like that person.* It shows every time we use us-them language, every time we say something about "those people," every time we think in those terms.

You can feel the distance in his use of the word "this": "this tax collector." Now he has stopped praying and started peeking at the other person. He opens his eyes just a little. Coolly, he measures himself against a neighbor and is quietly pleased with the difference.

Had the tax collector measured himself against the Pharisee and despaired at the difference, his prayer would have been just as false. If the tax collector had measured himself against the Pharisee and prayed, *God, why can't I be like that person?* that prayer would have been just as off base.

It's the competitive sideward glance that distorts prayer. *God, I thank you that I am not like....*

The tax collector, wrong as he is about so much, has at least got his eyes right. He doesn't even notice the Pharisee, but is *standing afar off*, entirely lost in his poor prayer. Jesus says *he would not even look up into heaven*. His eyes are down to his heart, which he is beating with his fist.

Both men pray about themselves, but one of them is scanning the room, while the other is oblivious to all but his own condition. There's the difference. One prays with a sideward glance. The other prays with his eyes down on his own heart.

Paul Duke says that someone should draw a cartoon of a congregation at prayer with thought balloons over each head. Worshipers would be saying,  
*Thank you that I'm not like these fundamentalists or*  
*Thank you that I'm not like these liberals or*  
*Thank you that I'm above all this or*  
*Thank you that I'm not like those other people.*

Our capacity for smugness is astonishing, really. We pray with a competitive sideward glance. When we take our eyes off our own shadowy hearts, there's no place else to look but at someone else. There's no comfort but in claiming, *Well, I'm not like that.*

*God be merciful to me, a sinner*, whispers the man who is not at all good, but who is at least looking at his own lousy heart. And offering it.

He's not unlike the woman whom Jesus would soon see in that very temple, the one who throws her last two pennies into the plate. Like the widow's gift, the tax collector's prayer is poor, it's not given from any abundance but from his need, and it's all that he holds in his crooked hands. And somewhere, God who is watching, cheers.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who came to the gates of heaven to be greeted by St. Peter. Peter asks the man if he can give a brief history of his life with an emphasis on the good deeds he had done in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven. *You will need 1000 points to be admitted*, Peter tells the man.

*This will be a cinch*, the man thinks to himself, *I've been involved in church from the days of my youth*. Then he begins to list his activities for Peter. He was an officer in his youth group, served in every possible position he could, was on the Coordinating Council was a deacon, was on every committee the church had to offer. His list was extensive.

*Very impressive*, Peter smiles at the man. An angel standing with them also smiled and nodded as he tallied the points and then whispered in Peter's ear.

Peter tells the man, *This is quite striking— we seldom see men of your very good works. You will be pleased to know that you have 327 points! Is there anything else you can think of?*

The poor soul breaks into a cold sweat and begins to reach deep for every single act of kindness he could think of. He listed them as the angel scratched furiously on his angelic clip board and nodded his head in admiration.

Peter looks at the clip board and says, *This is quite exceptional! You now have a total of 402 points. Can you think of anything else?*

The distressed guy strives to recall good deeds—like the time he helped a little old lady across the street. He finally arrives at a grand total of 431 points and cries out, *I am sunk! There is no hope for me! What more could I have done? O Lord, all I can do is beg for your mercy!*

*THAT*, exclaims Peter, *Is a thousand points!*