

February 28, 2021
Who do you want to be when you grow up?
Luke 18:9-14

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Think of yourself as a Jewish child back in Jesus' day. You see two people praying in the Temple. One is a good man, a religious man, a respected man. The other is an evil man, an amoral man, a despised man. Who do you want to grow up to be?

The person you would love to be ... The Pharisee is a godly, good person. He is a model of religious integrity in a nation where most people are nominally "religious," but few actually practice their faith. They teach the Scriptures, encourage people to pray, live righteously, and emphasize going to worship. They yearn for revival in their nation.

Pharisees try to obey every detail of the Old Testament Law and the traditions and interpretations of the law ... and then some! The Law requires one annual fast day on the Day of Atonement: good Pharisees, like this fellow fasted twice a week: 104 times per year. More than that, Pharisees followed special rules about everything, including hand washing. You had to wash with specially stored water, with a specific amount of water. You had to wash your hands in a very specific way. Pharisees passionately talk the talk AND walk the walk.

Obviously, it is hard to live this way and live a "normal" life. The point is Pharisees do NOT live normal lives. The word "Pharisee" means "separated one." They live separately from other people. They do not talk with, do business with, or eat with people who do not take things as seriously as they do – other Pharisees. The result is that they live separately. And they look down on everyone else. They know they are GOOD people; anyone who is less spiritual or less devoted is less good.

You can respect this man. Like him, you love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Like him, you want to serve God as faithfully as you can, living as morally purely as possible, trying to be faithful to all God's commands. Like him, you have a passion to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

And so, the Pharisee prays. Officially it's a prayer of thanksgiving. *"I thank you, God, that I am not like other people – cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income."* He isn't really thankful at all; he is very pleased with himself. He actually reminds God how thankful the Lord should be to have this guy on the God-team.

The last person you'd want to be ... Then there is the tax collector. Tax collectors were Jews who work for the Romans. They are responsible to raise a certain amount of money from a region, but how they get it, who pays it, and how much of a "service charge" they add, is totally up to them. So, they overtax the poor and vulnerable and undertax the rich (who can afford to bribe them). Between exorbitant commissions and bribes, they become fabulously wealthy.

He has brought shame on his family. He has been kicked out of the synagogue. He may be Jewish in name, but he is an outcast – he has turned his back on his people and his God. Thank God you are not this guy. You have not betrayed your country and abused your own people. He's the type of person who probably has all sorts of other "issues" in his life – probably drinks too much, he's sexually immoral, and on and on. There but for the grace of God go you!

You hear Jesus talk about the tax collector: *"The tax collector stood at a distance (good thing). He dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed (good thing). Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, **the** sinner'" (the original Greek text does use the article, "the" – this man is not just "a" sinner; he is "the" ultimate sinner). Should this kind of wretch even be in the temple? Does God hear the prayers of people of such a bad person?*

Sometimes we take this parable and make simple equations: Pharisee = bad guy; Tax collector = good guy. No Jew hearing this story back in Jesus' day would have thought that. They would assume the exact opposite: Pharisee = good, tax collector = bad. Jesus' concludes, *"I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and **those who humble themselves will be exalted.**"* This is shocking. Astonishing. Unsettling.

The Pharisee's devotion to God, passion for Scripture, and right-living is GOOD. But there is something ***not good*** in his character, too. The ***tragedy of the Pharisee*** is that, he is so confident about his "good" life, he confesses nothing to God. No self-examination. No issues to deal with. No room for improvement. No confession. No change of anything. The pity of the story is he goes home no different than he came.

What about the tax collector? His lifestyle, moral choices, and all his actions to date are NOT GOOD. But there is something ***good***, too. Jesus puts His finger on it: The tax collector, Jesus says, is humble: he recognizes his shortcomings, confesses them, and wants to change. He turns his life around. To use a biblical word, he ***REPENTS***. ***The good news of tax collector is that he goes home a changed person.***

Humility and repentance

The Greek word for repentance in the Gospels (metanoia) is literally the word for "turning." To repent literally means to change your direction in life.

Imagine, for instance, you want to drive to Calgary. You start off, eastbound, on Highway 3. You go through Coaldale, Taber ... you see signs to Medicine Hat, but nothing about Calgary. Your GPS tells you need to make a U-turn. You have a choice. You can tell yourself it's a good thing you're such a good driver, you have such a great sense of direction, and you know better than the GPS – thank God you're not like those drivers driving west. If you just believe hard enough, drive far enough, you'll get to Calgary, right??? No ... OR, you can pull over. Stop. Admit you're going the wrong direction. Recognize this road will NEVER get you to Calgary. Make a U-turn (safely, of course). And restart, in the right direction. That's what repentance/metanoia means.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, called out to his followers: *"Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near!"* (Matthew 3:2). Jesus began his ministry with a similar call: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news"* (Mark 1:15).

We all make mistakes. We are all going in the wrong direction. We're all sinners. Recognizing this is the starting point of Christian thinking. But genuine conversion requires repentance: we understand the foolish, misguided things we've done, admit the harmful consequences of our action in the world, AND demonstrate our new self.

Some folks present repentance as simply confessing, claiming our sins are forgiven, and then, with a shake of the head, thinking: *"Phew, I'm glad that's over. Back to business as usual."* Genuinely following Jesus is about showing real repentance before God. It's about changing our ways. The point is we DON'T go back to business as usual. Real repentance requires real change. John the Baptist went on to say, *"Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God"* (Matthew 3:8).

Paul explains that those who consider themselves "in Christ" must show *"tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience"* (Colossians 3:12). As authentic people of Jesus, filled with His Spirit, we will grow in *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

Shortly after Jesus tells this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, He enters Jericho (Luke 19:1-10). The chief tax collector in the region, a man named Zacchaeus, is very rich. Like the tax collector in Jesus parable, he has cheated his way to the top. But something about Jesus intrigues him. He wants to get a look at Jesus, but he's too short to see over the crowd. So he runs ahead and climbs a tree beside the road.

When Jesus comes by, he looks up at calls this tax collector by name. *"Zacchaeus! Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today."* Zacchaeus quickly climbs down and takes Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. The "good" people are displeased and grumble, *"He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner."*

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stands before Jesus and says, *"I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord. And if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"* He understands his sin. He admits it. AND he is going to radically change his ways – including making restitution for the past. That is repentance.

What does Jesus do? He responds, *"Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."*

Like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, Zacchaeus humbles himself before God. He confesses everything to Jesus. No pride. No excuses. He's spiritually broken. He does the only thing he can do: he throws himself completely on God's mercy. That's good. And God forgives him (he is *"justified before God"*). The **good news?** Both the tax collector in the parable and Zacchaeus go home justified before God – forgiven – changed people. They have a new beginning, new life in all its fullness, new hope, new joy, new peace in the amazing grace and love of God. Their lives are going to be SO much better because they know the blessing of God's mercy, forgiveness and presence.

How about us?

And so we bring this parable home, into our personal lives. I could ask, do you know people who are like this self-righteous Pharisee – "religious" people, but not very nice, hard, judgmental, snobbish, unkind people? We all could point fingers. But notice when you point your finger at someone else, three fingers are pointing back at yourself.

Like the tax collector, let's not look at anyone but ourselves ...

- How am I like the Pharisee? Spend a couple of minutes thinking about that ... What ought the Pharisee to have done? What, therefore, do I need to do?
- How can I be like the humble, repentant tax collector? What did he (and Zacchaeus) do, that was right? What, therefore, do I need to do?

Who do you want to be as you continue to grow up? Think about that, not in terms of vocation, but in terms of character. Jesus is challenging us to be repentant people. Forgiven people. Forgiving people. Changed people. People of God. Authentic "in Christ" people. Holy Spirit people. Tender-hearted mercy people. Humble people. Loving people. Joyful people. Peace-making people. Patient people. Kind people. Good people. Faithful people. Gentle people. Self-controlled people. Honest people.

Filled with His Spirit, we will know the genuine love, grace, peace, hope, and joy that Jesus can bring into lives that are honestly, humbly, given to Him.

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