

A Topsy Turvy Tale on Prayer and True Spirituality

H. Stephen Shoemaker

October 20, 2019

A few weeks ago I preached a sermon from Luke 16 and its two parables about our relationship with wealth. Today's text is from Luke 18 where Jesus tells two parables about prayer.

The first is about a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. A widow kept coming to him asking his help with someone taking advantage of her. The judge refused to hear her case. But finally she wore him down with her incessant petitions, and he answered her pleas and rendered justice. Sometimes in life we have to do this: cry out for justice. Then Jesus applied it to prayer: If this unrighteous (*adikia*, same word for the unrighteous manager in Luke 16) judge will answer her plea, how much more will our God answer ours and come to our aid. Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable to urge us to keep on praying and "not lose heart." It is easy some days in the face of all life brings to lose heart. Prayer is a form of courageous and audacious hope.

Then Jesus told another parable, a topsy-turvy tale about prayer and true spirituality. “Two men went to the temple to pray.” It is easy to draw this picture in caricature, two comic strip figures.

We boo the self-righteous and judgmental Pharisee and cheer for the lowly tax-collector. Then we go home from church and say, “Thank God I’m not like that Pharisee!”—which of course turns us into our own kind of Pharisee.

So let us slow down, re-wind the reel and look at it again.

First of all, our terrible history of anti-Judaism has conditioned the way we interpret stories that include Pharisees. Amy Jill-Levine, the brilliant Jewish professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt, has said, rightly so, that most Christian scholarship and preaching have tried to make Jesus look good by making Jews look bad.

There was a century of German and European New Testament scholarship that villainized the Jews in the New Testament and tried to de-Judaize Jesus. It was a perfect breeding ground for Nazism and the Holocaust.

So let’s not focus on the Pharisee as a Jew; rather let’s try to identify the Pharisee in us!

In Jesus’ day the Pharisees were the group zealously committed to following the commandments of God. They helped Judaism survive when the

Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 60 AD and paved the way for Judaism today.

Moreover, Jesus befriended Pharisees *too*, and ate with them. And there is the passage where Pharisees came to him to help protect Jesus from the murderous rage of Herod. So let's not automatically villainize Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter.

Luke gives the lead-in to the parable with his own punch-line: "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." Which does happen, but it's like giving the "moral of the story" before the story, which spoils the hearer's exploration.

II

So hear it again. "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector." One thought he belonged there; the other, well for the other it was a risk to step in there. He had been taught the rules. This was the last place he belonged. But somehow he summoned the courage to go in and open his heart to God.

Note now their *postures*. The Pharisee "stood by himself" and prayed. By himself. This gives us a hint about his *spiritual* posture. There is the pride of *singularity*: "I alone Lord am righteous, good, faithful, etc. Richard Rohr has

focused on the spirit which infects too much religiosity: the desire to *be separate and superior*.

Most of us grew up being taught that our brand of religion was different than and superior to other kinds. We were taught to avoid those whose form of religion differed from ours. We can still easily fall into that kind of trap: “We alone are the real church, the true followers of Jesus!” *I thank you God that we are not like those other churches!*

II

Now comes his prayer. He begins:

I thank you God that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers.

Were these words something like saying, “There but for the grace of God go I”? He had been saved from some of the terrible fixes we get ourselves into. So he thanks God.

But mixed in with the thanksgiving was another kind of spirit. While praying he glances over at another figure praying and says, “or even like that *tax-collector* over there.”

It is the sin of the side-long glance. Out of the sides of our eyes we size someone up and make our judgment. Ever been distracted in prayer by not so generous thoughts about someone else? Maybe even someone in church?!

The side-long glance turns our hearts and minds from God to someone else, ruining the prayer. Do you ever roll your eyes over someone else's words or actions? I hate it when I do that! One form of the sin of pride is *the rolling of the eyes*.

Then the Pharisee continues his prayer, and what he says shows him to be an exemplary religious person, a spiritual superstar. "I fast twice a week", way beyond the prescribed instruction. "I give tithes of all I get." Jewish law commanded tithes of this or that, but not of everything! This man goes beyond what is expected.

But there's a problem about reciting your resume every time you pray in order to remind God how religious you are. What is this man focused on? His credentials. When we enter church we leave our credentials at the door. All of them. They just get in the way. Imagine a credentials box placed at the entrance of the church? Just drop them in. Now you are ready to worship!

III

Now to the tax-collector. You know his story from years of Sunday School and worship. He is a gouger, a cheat, a colluder with Rome, a traitor. People despised him.

But here he is in the Temple, where he no longer belongs, where he knows he'll get the stares of everyone around him. But at some point, his life had become a nightmare to himself. So he made his way there.

Look at his posture: "Standing afar off." Alone, trying to be invisible. He looked down. "He would not lift his eyes to the heavens". He struck his breast, an age-old ritual of repentance. And he prayed, six words in the Greek: "God, be merciful to me a sinner." (The Pharisee's prayer was 29 words.) Six words, a scrap of a psalm he had learned long ago in worship, before he had lost his way. Six words, a heart totally open to God, seeking the mercy of God.

What gets in the way of our opening own hearts like that? Our credentials, our pride? Sometimes our shame, a heart in hiding from all the terrible things people have said to us about us, terrible things we tell ourselves. Messages we've internalized. A heart protected

What gets in the way of our saying to God: "I need help. I need you." Perhaps the well-honed self-sufficiency we've built over the years.

Are we afraid of our own need, our neediness? Obery Hendricks, an African American New Testament scholar says “Throughout his ministry, Jesus treated people’s needs as holy by healing their bodies, their souls, their psyche.” Our needs are holy to God.

IV

Now to the topsy-turvy part of the parable. Jesus ends the story with these words: “I tell you, this man (the tax-collector) went down to his home justified rather than this other.” Rather than. Jesus just pulled the rug out from under a particular kind of piety.

The word “justified” may trip us up. What the word means at its deepest level is “in right relation”, right relation with God.

The Pharisee came into the temple wearing his piety like a general adorned with all his stars, bars and medals. The tax-collector came in with his need only.

This is where right relation with God begins: to come with our need only, and the little bit of faith we can cobble together.

Conclusion

I read years ago the true story of a young U.S. Marine returning home after a long tour of duty. His mother and the neighbors were so excited. They gathered around the front porch to welcome Joe home. But his name was no longer Joe, but now Josephina. He had transitioned into his womanhood while he was away.

As the taxi door opened, Josephina stepped out and walked her way to the door. The gathered friends became awkwardly silent. What to do, or say? But when she walked into the house, her mother took her in, first with her eyes, then into her arms. And her first words were: “Are you hungry?”

That’s what God cares about most: “Are you hungry?” And that’s what God says, when we wake up on Sunday and put on our clothes and walk through the doors of this church. And that’s all God asks when we leave our chairs and come to this table of grace.