

Luke 18.⁹⁻¹⁴

⁹And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. ¹¹Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹²I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.'

¹³And 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.'

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

Luke is the only Gospel writer to record Mary's Magnificat. In it she shares her insight into her child's surprising and scandalous intention of turning the world and its topsy-turvy values upside down.

"He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away."¹

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus presented individuals as heroes or role models whom society might overlook or even look down. At the same time, he often portrayed those who would normally be thought of as heroes or role models in a less than positive light. The parable found in this reading is one such example. It is difficult to imagine and describe the shock and scandal that this parable is likely to have created in his audience. The scandal is, however, easy to see. They killed Jesus for just such societal insolence as is found in this parable.

In this reading Jesus presents two individuals for our consideration. One is a respected, the other disrespected member of society. Both offer sincere prayer. There is no reason to doubt either man's claim. The Pharisee likely performed all the good that he claims to have done, while the Publican's confession of being a sinner is to be taken as an accurate self-evaluation. Yet, when the sinner left the temple to go home, he was justified, or right with God. The Pharisee was not.

What gives?

Jesus seems to find self-importance and self-righteousness one of the more disagreeable human traits. It is one that runs contrary to God's expectations of us. At the same time, Jesus highly values humility, or the willingness to acknowledge humiliating truths about ourselves. The Pharisee could not find his way to humiliation, perhaps because he did not trust God to respond compassionately. The Publican, perhaps because he had no other choice, expressed the humiliating truth about himself and trusted God with that truth.

In addition, Jesus does not care much for religion that has feelings of superiority as one of its major objectives. The Pharisee's prayer indicates that he cared most about proclaiming his supposed superiority. That false sense of superiority is, likely, what he loved best about his faith. As the Publican's open confession attests, he did not much care about appearances.

¹ Luke 1.⁵¹⁻⁵³

There are many other lessons that we might draw from Jesus' parable. But for today, in light of the Lent Season and its focus on confession and repentance, we would simply point out, again, the faithfulness of God when it comes to our sins and sinfulness. We can, like the Publican, confess our sins, no matter how humiliating, and, far from being upbraided, find ourselves being pronounced, justified, right with God. The Publican's prayer can act as a signpost, leading our way to obtaining all that we hope to receive from the Season through voluntary confession of humiliating self-truths.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 7, 2025)