

Scripture Reading: Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

There is an old Mac Davis song called "It's Hard to be Humble" that begins, "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way." This satirical song points out how quickly we determine our place as above that of others. At times we believe that the blessings we have received are of our own making, due to our brilliance and good works.

In today's parable, Jesus teaches about the human condition of self-righteousness. The Pharisee is learned, of high status, and follows the rules of fasting and tithing. The Pharisee prays to God, not for his undeserved gifts, but in thanks that he isn't one of "those people." One can just envision his upturned nose and eyes scanning others over his robed shoulder. It is as if he is saying, "Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way like me."

The tax collector also stood before the altar in prayer. In contrast to the Pharisee's haughty assuredness, the tax collector "would not even look up to heaven" (18:13).

He stood away from the others because he felt unworthy before God. He displayed his repentant heart as he cried, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" hoping to be restored to righteousness.

The twist at the end of Jesus' lesson is that the tax collector who recognized his sinful nature and turned to God for mercy was the one exalted! The Pharisee found no need to repent since he was "perfect."

Martin Luther wrote about believers not focusing on themselves but rather, by faith, on Christ and their neighbors. We are far from perfect in every way—and that is exactly why we seek the Lord's mercy.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, thank you for your steadfast mercy. Though I fail, I thank you for your forgiveness and guidance as I try again and again to be humble. I am reminded in your word to look toward you and not within myself. Amen.

~ Submitted by John Shoemaker for the Thirty-Second Reading of Lent