



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 24, 2004
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

on
Saint Luke 18:9-14

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THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In Jesus' famous parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying at the Temple, the Pharisee is pleased with himself and thanks God he is not like other men who are obvious sinners, "or even this tax collector." The tax collector stands at a distance agitated and distressed by his sense of unworthiness and sin, strikes his breast, and cries to God for mercy. Jesus said the second man, the tax collector, went home justified rather than the Pharisee; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Jesus' parable is about our disposition in prayer. Whether we are speaking of the Pharisee or the tax collector, the question is, how can we receive mercy from God. The answer is that we receive mercy through humility. Humility doesn't mean thinking, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee!"

It is worth noting that the Pharisee was a religious man living an upright life, the sort of life that we would hope to raise and educate ourselves and children to live. He did more than the Law of Moses required by his fasting and almsgiving. He was a solid citizen, a pillar, a man whose life should strengthen society.

Tax collectors were disliked by the religious Jews of Jesus' day, because they earned their livelihood collecting tribute for the resented Roman overlords, who did not care what means tax collectors used or what they made for themselves in the process, so long as they collected the money for Rome. Our tax collector's occupation was not the sort of vocation held up by Judea's religious leaders and educators.

But Jesus held up the tax collector as justified with God in his prayer rather than the Pharisee. In doing so, was he putting down uprightness, overturning religious training and education? Was he lifting up the vocation of a tax collector? No, he is showing us how dangerous pride is, and how pride makes us unable to ask and therefore receive mercy from God.

The Pharisee doesn't really pray. Jesus says that he "prays thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men...'" In the words of a commentator, the Pharisee

“glances at God and contemplates himself.”¹ By contrast, the tax collector can hardly bear to contemplate himself, and, although his eyes are downcast, his heart clearly is focused on God in a cry for mercy. The tax collector truly prays.

Pride is said to go before a fall because pride makes us forget God. Pride makes us forget that all of life is a constant gift. When we contemplate ourselves with pleasure and fortify our sense of self-congratulation by looking down on others, we have lost our bearings and set ourselves in a precarious position.

Humility, in contrast to pride, is the sober, prudent course of living life. The reason why Jesus says, Blessed are the poor, or the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, is that the poor do not live with the temptation to forget their need. They are not under the delusion of self-sufficient security that so often comes with success and prosperity.

Jesus was and is often accused by his critics of favoring the outcast, the poor, the weak and the sinners; of seeming to support failure and even sin in his ministry of mercy. It is true that his sharpest conflicts were with the religious leaders, the good and successful people, of his day, led by the Pharisees. But Jesus was not attacking their good deeds; he was attacking their pride and their scorn of others who were not so good or fortunate; the pride and scorn which kept them far from mercy because they were just that far from thinking they needed it. In fact, they wound up nailing mercy to the cross in the person of Jesus.

The message of Jesus is that God is merciful. The question in today's parable is our disposition, which determines our capacity to receive mercy. Pride and scorn indispose us to receive mercy. On the other hand, humility has an unlimited capacity to receive it: the merciful receive yet more mercy. The gracious receive yet more grace.

Both men in today's parable received what they prayed for at the Temple and took it home. The tax collector went home “justified,” having asked for the mercy God lives and wills to give. The Pharisee went home, his prayer having made no difference; for he asked for nothing other than to admire himself as he was.

How could the Pharisee have gone home “justified”? By thanking God for the many gifts he had received; by praying to be a good steward of those gifts for the glory of God and the common good; by praying against the temptation to selfishness and complacency – this reveals a disposition for mercy and kinship with the tax collector.

What do we ask for when we come to the Temple to pray? Do we merely glance at God and contemplate ourselves? Or do we ask for grace and mercy? Do we look at our fellow worshipers and thank God that we are not like them? Or do we see them, along with ourselves, for who they and we all are: God's children loved by God every moment, the children for whom Christ went to his cross, whom God wishes to bless with mercy and grace?

Having a healthy ego and a sense of proper pride are basic goals of normal human development. But the Gospel invites us to grow up still further, into what is called “the fullness of the stature of Christ.” The child of God is called out of the world of selfishness to live in the place where love and mercy dwell. If it takes the shock of a parable which offends our sense of respectability, which humbles our proud inner Pharisee as it exalts our distressed inner tax collector, in order to prompt us to grow this way, this is all to the good. Then we are learning to pray. And in learning to pray, we are learning to desire and to share the mercy we all, Pharisees and tax collectors alike, so thoroughly need.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ International Bible Commentary, F.F. Bruce, General Editor, p. 1218.