

“Which Person Is Closer to God?”

Luke 18:9–14

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During the September 22, 2001, installment of NPR’s *Weekend Edition*, Scott Simon delivered an essay that compared the responses of two individuals to the terrorist attacks of September 11. One response was from Jerry Falwell who said that God allowed this to happen to punish America for allowing sinners like pagans, feminists, gays, and ACLU members to dwell in our land. When this response received criticism, Falwell attempted an apology of sorts, but no one bought it. The attitude of his response squared with his ministry.

The other response referenced by Scott Simon was from Mark Bingham, a 31-year-old gay rugby player from San Francisco who was a passenger on United Airlines flight 93, the one that went down on September 11 outside Pittsburgh because a group of passengers overtook the terrorists. This 6-foot-4, 225-pound gay rugby player, the epitome of everything Falwell detested, was in that group. So, Scott Simon asks, “If you were on a plane being hijacked by terrorists, who would you want to be sitting in the seat next to you, the Reverend Falwell or this gay rugby player? And which person is closer to God?”

I share this essay with you knowing it will evoke different responses — irritation, shock, affirmation, hope. The common ground for everyone in this room is probably our perspective on the self-proclaimed prophet from Lynchburg, but the other side of this comparison no doubt evokes different responses. So, why would I share the essay? My intent is not to be divisive but to help us get the biblical story which we cannot do today unless we begin by being shocked.

Parables in general are stories designed to shock us into a new perception of reality, stories that turn worlds upside down. The parable Jesus tells in today’s reading from Luke 18, the parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray, is such a story. If we are not unsettled by it, we have missed the point. Furthermore, the point is very

close to that of the Scott Simon essay. The two men Jesus says go up to the temple to pray look a lot like Jerry Falwell and Mark Bingham. The only difference is that Scott Simon ends his essay with a question, “Which person is closer to God?” Jesus is not so subtle. *“I tell you, this man (the tax collector, the sinner, the gay rugby player) went down to his home justified rather than the other (the Pharisee, the self-righteous zealot, Jerry Falwell); for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

It is a familiar parable, but we still struggle with its message. What does the Pharisee do wrong? Why does the tax collector go home justified? And what must we do to become closer to God?

The place to begin is with what the Pharisee does wrong. His failing is not in his actions. He follows the laws and practices of faith. In fact, Pharisees in general are not what we think. They are reformers, like Jesus, and not all of them are opposed to him. The first hearers of this parable do not think the Pharisee will be the bad guy. He will be a good guy, and this good guy practices piety. He prays, fasts, and tithes. He fills out his pledge card on time! So, what does he do wrong?

It has something to do with his pride. It has something to do with his motivation, with the reason he practices piety — not to be close to God but to be better than others. But it is seen most clearly in the fact that he distances himself from the tax collector in terms of where he stands — by himself — and how he prays — God, I thank you that I am not like... him!

Genuine faith begins in humility, it seeks closeness and intimacy with God, and it draws us closer to our brothers and sisters, but the Pharisee is not interested in any of these things. He considers himself better than others, he takes credit for his righteousness, and the last thing he wants is to be close to sinners like this tax collector! It is a Falwellian posture. It is an image of self-assured spiritual arrogance presuming to look down in judgment on others. The Pharisee has done some things right but for the wrong reasons. So, they yield him nothing.

What is the message for us here? Right actions alone won't bring us close to God, only doing things for the right reasons will. Pride is the

enemy of faith, especially in a system of belief wherein grace opens us to eternity. Most importantly, how we view our lives in relationship to others may be the clearest indicator of where we stand with God. If we think we are morally superior, if we spend a substantial portion of our time critiquing the lives of others rather than looking in the mirror, we are not on the right path. Jesus says we will be humbled.

There is a character named Mrs. Turpin in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation" who experiences this truth. She is proud and self-assured. She thanks God daily that she was not born black or ugly or what she calls white trash. She figures the world is made the way it is for a reason, she thanks Jesus for making it so and making her like she is, with so many good qualities and a good disposition besides.

But one day, a patient in a doctor's waiting room attacks her, saying, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog!" "I am not," Mrs. Turpin replies tearfully, "a warthog. From hell." But her denial has no force, and this unsettles her. She even visits her hogs to try and make sense of things. She is not like them, is she?

Then, she has a revelation in which she sees hogs and blacks and white trash all rumbling up toward heaven, and as they are marching, even their virtues are burned away. This is how one is justified, the story proclaims, not by strength but by weakness, not by self-righteousness but by grace, and we are all part of the same caravan of heavenly travelers, saints and sinners, one and all.

The sin of spiritual pride, of thinking we are better than others, may be the most insidious of all because it is so difficult to recognize. But it is powerful enough to isolate us from God and neighbor. The Pharisee may not do much wrong, but what he does is critical.

This having been said, what does the tax collector do right? What can we learn from him about drawing closer to God? Jesus is not calling us to live poorly. He is not putting down the righteousness of the Pharisee to glorify the sinfulness of the tax collector. Tax collectors in first-century Palestine are a creation of the Empire. The Romans hire opportunistic local citizens for this dirty work, thinking this will be less

humiliating than using Roman bureaucrats, but the result is that the tax collectors are viewed as traitors who have sold out to the enemy.

In our terms, these are arms dealers helping Putin wreak havoc in Ukraine. Jesus is not suggesting that living such a life is more honorable than attending worship and serving in the clothing ministry, nurturing children in faith or participating in mission work in Romania. Nor is he saying that as long as the merchant of death one day says, “Oops, I’m sorry,” all the wrong is forgotten and everything is alright!

What Jesus is saying is that genuine humility is the only thing that can motivate authentic faith. Gut-wrenching self-awareness is the only thing that gets us closer to God and our brothers and sisters. Sometimes we pray out of habit or because it is the right thing to do, and sometimes we pray because our life depends on it. The tax collector’s prayer falls into the latter category. It is not a casual oops but a heartfelt expression of self-awareness and contrition — God, have mercy on me, a sinner!

Better a sinner who knows he is a sinner than a saint who knows he is a saint, according to an old saying. But the truth is we are all sinners, saintly or not. The only difference is that some sinners recognize their condition and thus open themselves to the possibility of grace. This is what the tax collector does right.

The message for us is that genuine humility brings us closer to God and, at the same time, moves us in the direction of our brothers and sisters. We are not talking about false self-deprecation or a superficial pretense of contrition. We’re talking about an honest and heartfelt self-view. Such a view allows us to approach God with humility and awareness that it is grace and grace alone that makes us whole.

But such a view also makes us more approachable for others. There is nothing more off-putting than an arrogant self-righteous posture. Yet there is nothing that endears someone to us as quickly as humility, genuine self-awareness, the capacity to laugh or cry over self when necessary. It’s why William Sloane Coffin said that we can build a community out of seekers of truth, but not out of possessors of truth.

In the final scene of the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana must pass through three booby traps to get to the Holy Grail and save his father’s life. Each trap has a riddle tied to faith and each is

lethal. The clue for the first trap is this, “The breath of God. Only the penitent may pass.” Each person before Indiana fails to get it and thus the trap kills him. Fast moving saws come roaring out of the side of the cave and decapitate each unworthy man.

Indiana knows the danger, he repeats the phrase to himself, “Only the penitent may pass... only the penitent... only the penitent...” Finally, just in time, it dawns on him. A penitent person bows in humility before God. He does so quickly and, as he bows, the saws roar just over his head, leaving him alive and grateful. He proceeds to pass the other two traps, recover the Grail, and save his father’s life.

Such is the challenge for us if ever we are to recover our Holy Grail. The way of pride, self-interest, and judging others only serves to distance us from God, others, and our own best selves. The way of humility and penitence leads to God, friendship, and life.

Which person is closer to God — Jerry Falwell or Mark Bingham? That is up to God. Jesus’ parable makes it clear that judgment isn’t our responsibility. We are called to go back to the mirror and take stock of where we are. If we are where ought to be, we won’t be looking down at others, nor will we be looking up at them. We’ll be looking across at brothers and sisters like us who are simply trying to do the best they can each day in the grace of God.