

Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector  
Psalm 51:1-12, Luke 18:9-14  
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**Psalm 51:1-12** (New Revised Standard Version)

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.

<sup>4</sup> Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

<sup>6</sup> You desire truth in the inward being;<sup>[a]</sup>  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

<sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

<sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

<sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

## **Luke 18:9-14** New Living Translation

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

<sup>13</sup> “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

## **Sermon**

Every once in a while Jesus serves up the moral of the story to a parable. It’s happened during the ones we’ve looked at this summer.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids? “Keep Alert! You don’t know the day or the hour of my return.”

The parable of the lost coin? “There is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”

In today’s parable, Jesus gives us not one, but two morals of the story. He wants to make sure we don’t miss his point! One parable, two reminders. The passage is only six verses long and a verse and a half are morals! Here they are:

Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else.

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Listen up! If you think too highly of yourself, there are going to be problems.

Take it from me. Some of you know that I have a Miata—a Mazda two seater convertible—that Dad is watching for me while I live here in Evanston. It

turned 30 years old earlier this month—I got it the very first year they came out, and I put my name on a waiting list before they had even been released. Mine was the second in the state of Kentucky.

I was living then in Elizabethtown, with its 15,000 people and, at least so far, exactly one Miata. I'm 23 years old, and my new car is the talk of the town. One summer evening I go to the gym and am feeling even more pleased with myself than usual. As I pull up to a four way stop, I am literally thinking about how any young woman in Hardin County would be a fool not to date me.

Pulling up next to me is a car with two of these young women, and I overhear one of them say, “Ooh it’s the Miata guy!” Needless to say, everything I am thinking about myself is *totally true*.

Until I go to pull away. And I stall out. In front of the two young women who would be fools not to date me. Who looked back at me and laughed as they drove away.

I’m definitely not saying that Jesus made my car stall. But I do think what he said is true: “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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There’s no Miata in our parable for today, but I’m not sure there needs to be, since there’s someone who’s maybe even more full of himself than I was. The Pharisee—a religious leader—goes to the synagogue to pray. In those days he would have been a very respected member of society. And he prays,

“O Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other people: my next-door neighbor who is enjoying a round of golf right now instead of attending worship; my friend in the other political party who does not understand your will for our nation; or even that scruffy looking taxi driver sitting two pews over. I am here every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening; I pledge faithfully; I serve on three important church committees.”

(At least that's the way commentator Laura Sugg paraphrases it.)

Meanwhile the tax collector—the one everyone despises as a greedy traitor—he says,

“O God be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.”

The Pharisee keeps one eye on himself, maybe preening in the mirror, but leaves the other eye free so that it can look down on everyone else.

Meanwhile the tax collector puts an eye on his own sin, and lifts his other eye up to God, asking forgiveness. The longer the Pharisee prays, the more he exalts himself, while the tax collector humbles himself before God.

And we already know the moral of the story, that the humble get exalted but everyone who exalts themselves gets humbled.

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This month we've celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing on the moon, and I saw a story that reminds me that even the most exalted humans can be humble. After the spacecraft carrying Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had landed on the surface of the moon—before Armstrong's famous “One small step for man...one giant leap for mankind,” here's what Aldrin said to the control center in Houston:

“I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in...to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to invite each person listening...to give thanks in his own individual way.”

Now I suppose the only way to get a bigger head than driving around in a new Miata in a small Kentucky town is to land your spaceship on the moon. So a prayer like the Pharisee's would have been in order: “O God, I thank you that I am so much more accomplished than everyone else at NASA, that I performed so well that I'm up here now, that people fifty years from now will be mentioning me in their sermons in Lake Forest, IL.”

But that's not what Aldrin did. Instead, during that moment of silence, he opened a small plastic packet that held a piece of bread and a tiny silver cup

and enough wine to fill it. He poured the wine into the cup—it curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup in the low gravity of the moon—and he took communion,

“Symbolizing the thought that God was revealing himself there, too, as [we] reached out into the universe.”

Aldrin is one of the most celebrated Americans in the last half century—but he learned at Webster Presbyterian Church in Houston that people who exalt themselves are humbled. He learned that the core of Christian life is to exalt Jesus—the one who humbly let his body be broken and his blood be shed—rather than to exalt himself.

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Jesus did not have one eye on himself, preening for the camera, and one to look down at everyone else. No—Jesus kept others directly in his gaze, exalting those whom society humbled. Just here in the Gospel of Luke, we see that he was born to a young virgin with no status, in an animal’s trough. He called fishermen to be his first disciples. He said people who are poor will be blessed. He let a prostitute wash his feet. He told stories that lifted up Samaritans and greedy sons. He went to the cross, to save even those who reject him.

Jesus humbled himself to the point of death, and then God exalted him. Exalted him to reign just as he had lived while on earth—valuing each one of us, loving each one of us. He has us directly in his gaze, not looking down at us, but caring for us, and knowing each one of us deeply.

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Part of the challenge for the Pharisee, I think, is that he would never have run in the same circles with the tax collector. A religious leader with such a despised person—they just didn’t mix. Truth be told, the tax collector would be just as likely to avoid the Pharisee as the Pharisee would be to avoid the tax collector. It would have been a lot harder for the Pharisee to look down on the tax collector in our parable today if they had actually gotten to know each other.

Two thousand years later, it is still a lot easier to look down on other people when we don't actually know them.

The challenging thing is, fewer people than ever actually get to interact with people different from ourselves. An article came out in February of this year in the *Atlantic* called "These are the Americans Who Live in a Bubble." It discussed findings from a survey undertaken by the Public Religion Research Institute and the magazine, which found that about a quarter of people in America seldom or never interact with people who don't share their partisan affiliation.

Now we might be surprised by this, because only one in twenty college educated whites say they seldom or never encounter people from a different political party. But the survey found that most people interact with diversity when they don't have much choice about it—at work. About three quarters of people's interactions with people from another party happen at work. Less than half said they have political differences among their friends, less than four in ten within their families, and "vanishingly few" at religious services.

When we don't know people who are different from us, it's a lot easier to look down on them. Yesterday in the Washington Post, Arthur Brooks wrote about a study on what percentage of Republicans and Democrats alike describe people in our own party as "honest," "reasonable," and "caring," and what percentage describe the other side as "brainwashed" and "hateful."

So turn to someone first, and guess what percentage of people describe their own party as "honest," "reasonable," and "caring." More than 90% of both parties. Now guess how many people describe people in the other party as "brainwashed" and "hateful." It's 80%. 80%!

There's a name for this syndrome, the belief that I am motivated by love but you are motivated by hatred. Psychologists call it "motive attribution asymmetry." But I think Jesus would have called it "The Pharisee Syndrome." Like Pharisees who keep one eye on ourselves, preening in the mirror, and the other eye looking down on the tax collectors around us, too many of us have great confidence in our own righteousness, and scorn others who don't agree with us.

Of course, the “Pharisee Syndrome” isn’t just restricted to politics. We can fall prey to the same temptation when we consider people of other races, or of less education or wealth, and look down on them. But how would things be different if, like Jesus, we could look them in the eye and humble ourselves?

Author Barbara Brown Taylor thinks a little eye to eye contact can go a long way. She writes,

The next time you go to the grocery store, try engaging the cashier. You do not have to invite her home for lunch or anything, but take a look at her face while she is trying to find “arugula” on her laminated list of produce. Here is someone who exists even when she is not ringing up your groceries, as hard as that may be for you to imagine. She is someone’s daughter, maybe someone’s mother as well. She has a home she returns to where she hangs up her apron, a kitchen that smells of last night’s supper, a bed where she occasionally lies awake at night wrestling with her own demons and angels.

“You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at [Jewell] today,” she says looking right at you. All that is required is that you look back. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say “thanks.” Sometimes that is all another person needs: to know that she has been seen—not as the cashier, but as the person.”

It’s not much, but it’s a start. It’s a first step to moving us away from the Pharisee Syndrome, with one eye preening and one eye looking down. It’s a step toward becoming like Jesus, who looks at each of us directly. It’s a step away from having great confidence in our own righteousness and showing scorn to those around us. It’s a step toward remembering that those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

It’s a step toward the morals of the story. It’s a step toward the abundant life. It’s a step toward the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.