

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

THE HUMILITY OF FAITH

Luke 18:9-14

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25)

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Luke 18:9 He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 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!’ 14 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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Standing Alone

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Rite Thing for the Wrong Reason*

Praying, fasting, tithing, and thanksgiving sound like good things to do. After all, they were commanded by God, weren't

they? The Pharisee thought so, and undoubtedly the tax collector thought so, too, and Jesus doesn't argue the point. So these "rite" things are not, in themselves, wrong. What then, makes them wrong in this parable, at least insofar as the Pharisee is concerned? It is in the "prayer" thanking God that "I am not like other people" (v. 11). True, the Pharisee is not a thief, etc. as judged by other people, but in the sight of God (in the temple) the Pharisee is a thief, etc., that is, a "sinner" as the tax collector rightly said (v. 13).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Trusting in Oneself*

The parable was, and is, told to those "who trust in themselves that they are righteous" (v. 9). "Trust" here means to be convinced of one's own righteousness or right standing or worthiness before God. Such self-righteousness does not rely on God but on the "rite" things. Little did the Pharisee know that doing the rite things do not undo one's inherent sinfulness. The Pharisee presumed that doing God's command had the ability to make him righteous, that is, pleasing to God; he is tempted to believe that he can rely upon himself. In truth, what God's command exposes is sin's presumption that "I am not like other people" (v. 11).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Standing Utterly Alone*

The Pharisee, in his self-righteous contempt for other people, was "standing by himself" (v. 11), utterly alone before the commanding God. All the Pharisee could do were the rite things, but not the right thing. Being a sinner, his was only capable of sin; and as a sign of his very sinfulness he thanks God (v. 11) for not being like other people! As Jesus put it, that man did not leave the temple a "righteous" man (that is, "justified," v. 14, the same word in Greek as in v. 9). Standing utterly alone, he was left alone before the righteous judgment of God, which is

eternal death.

PROGNOSIS: Standing with Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Merciful God*
Jesus, the parable teller, promises that God will exalt all who are humble before God (v. 14). On what basis can Jesus make such a promise, that we should believe it? Certainly not on the basis of us doing the “rite” thing, which in the parable not even the tax collector claimed to do. Jesus could only promise God’s mercy (the forgiveness of sin) on the basis of his own humility. Jesus’ humility was not wishful thinking but becoming a sinner like other sinners, suffering with them and bearing their sin for them (that is, God’s righteous judgment, death) on the cross. Jesus’ humility leading to the cross demonstrates not only his own sinlessness but the believability of the promise for us! Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is God’s promise of mercy made real.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Relying on Christ*

The tax collector (like Abraham and countless other faithful Jews) believed in the promise of God’s mercy upon sinners, though he scarcely knew how or when God would accomplish it. The tax collector “said” (not even consciously as rite-ful prayer, yet as true prayer), “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13). This is true humility and trustfulness and faithfulness to God. Our advantage over the tax collector is the new reality that Jesus brought into the world, that he, Jesus, humbled himself on behalf of all sinners, that all sinners would be exalted who simply trust that it is so (v. 14). No more illusory reliance on oneself, no more illusory reliance on doing the rite things or even the right things, for in truth all righteousness resides in God alone and in his Christ. Our reliance upon Jesus is simply God’s promise come true for us. Thanks be to God!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Doing the Right Thing for the Right Reason

It is clearly not enough to do the right thing, nor even the right things, if these things are done self-righteously in view of our sinful presumptions. Instead, all things need to be done in humility before God, which is nothing other than faith in Jesus the Christ. Such faith is bound to produce works that are truly good because they are no longer our own works but the works of God (see Augsburg Confession, Article 6). In this way, all so-called right things become truly right. The only question remaining is, How shall I serve my neighbor (those “other people” in v. 11)? There is no right answer. All answers are right/righteous-without exception.

[Endnote: While all ethical answers are right/righteous from the perspective of faith in Christ (Step 6), they are equally wrong from the perspective of our continuing sinfulness (Step 1). The Prognosis frees us to choose ethical responses without final condemnation (God’s promise) yet knowing full well that every possible ethic contains the means by which we are judged here and now (God’s command). Apart from Christ, we (our whole selves, spirit and body together) cannot do anything right/righteous. And so we trust that God will complete his promise by resurrecting us anew into eternal life with Christ.]