

One of the commentaries I read on this passage mentioned that this is one of the three best loved parables from the gospel of Luke—the other two being the Prodigal and the Good Samaritan. We understand that these stories about very earthy and familiar things—things like family troubles, land deals, dinner parties, praying in the temple as real life illustrations of human relationships. But we also view these stories as being about more than real-world narratives which we can recognize. They are about eternal and transcendent truths—truths about God and truths about the really important things of life. The three I mentioned about are certainly well known and only appear in the gospel of Luke. I wonder if that perceived popularity is true and why. We usually assign the characters within the earthly story a part in the narrative of God’s kingdom and the relationship between God and mankind. If this is a favorite parable, does it have to do with where do we locate ourselves within the story? And what does that choice say about our relationship with God and each other? Our culture is very preoccupied with this notion of keeping score. That seems to be something the Pharisee is doing as the Pharisee stands praying. “I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.” When we think of keeping score you might think that is confined to the realm of sporting events which so dominate our consciousness—who wins what games, not only in team competitions but individual rankings are tracked daily. But the score keeping is more pervasive than that—we measure performances in the workplace in much the same manner—establishing standards and judging one another based on them. Pragmatically this outlook has a place in determining the success of the business or other venture which is dependent upon achieving a certain outcome. But the attitude often spills over into how we interact with our fellow workers—we are very status conscious. This way of looking at ourselves and others is part of this parable. The general acceptance of this world view of point keeping—has some effects on other aspects of our lives; perhaps including our spiritual life of faith. In many of the gospel accounts which feature a Pharisee, our assumption is that the Pharisee represents what should not be done. In Mark and Matthew’s account you can be sure that the Pharisee is the one out of sync with Jesus and the coming kingdom he is proclaiming. And of course, when we look for ourselves within the story our concern is to not be identified as being like the Pharisee. Sometimes in Luke’s narrative, it isn’t quite so clear cut that the Pharisee is a bad guy—they do come to warn Jesus about Herod in Luke, a Pharisee provides the tomb for Jesus and he also shares table fellowship with them. Some of his teaching parables are directed toward them in the manner of a teacher, just as he addresses the disciples and the crowds which come to him. So within the context of this particular parable what are we to take away about how we are to live? At first glance this parable seems simple. The arrogance of the Pharisee is immediately offensive and causes us to view him as insufferable. The poor tax collector is so appealingly modest. It is easy to identify with him and his humble prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” No one is likely to identify with this Pharisee and his “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” Cass closed. Well, not quite. Because it is not that simple. And that response is just too easy and comfortable for us. Remember to whom Jesus is speaking in this parable. “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Although we can quickly identify that the self-righteous in this story is going to be the one out of step with kingdom values, with the crowd that Jesus

was speaking to that day it would not have been an easy thing to hear. And if we listen to how they would have heard it, it might not be so comfortable for us to hear either. We often forget just who Pharisees were and who tax collectors were in their culture. We tend to view the Pharisees as arrogant, legalistic, prudish cartoons of self-righteousness so this manner of speaking to God about others does not seem discordant. But in the first century they were actually good religious folks who were just trying to take their religion seriously. Pharisees were honest to a fault; they were dependable. Pharisees were upstanding; responsible and accountable. Today you might say they were the ones who served on committees, went to board meetings, kept the dandelions out of their lawns, picked up after their dogs, and obeyed the speed limit signs. In other words, they were the pillars of the community. When Jesus put an arrogant, judgmental, self-righteous prayer on the lips of someone they knew to be a decent, hard-working, clean-living Pharisee—it would not have sat well with his listeners. If we view the description as coming close to our own world view, it doesn't sit well with us either. And then the other individual in the story was a tax collector. This figure being presented favorably would have been bound to have given the most offense to the maximum number of people. Tax collectors are never popular in any culture, and you must remember that these were particularly living outside acceptable norms for their community. They were collecting Roman taxes. Roman tax collection was rather like a franchise operation. The individual bought a license that allowed him to collect as much money as you could from his neighbors, but only some of the money had to go back to Rome. The license holder got to pocket the difference and thus enriched himself at the expense of his neighbors. First-century tax collection was veritably state-sponsored extortion. And the man in the synagogue was Jewish. Jewish tax collectors like this guy were judged to be traitors to their nation as well as extortionists. They were working for the oppressor and getting rich doing it. This made them especially despised. So in this narrative it is shocking when Jesus says the tax collector returns home in a better position in his relationship to God than does the Pharisee. It would have shocked all who heard it. So let's look at what might be the issue here. The key is in that opening statement by Jesus. This Pharisee's spiritual problem is not that he's exactly a bad person. He was actually one of the good guys. He lists the ways he is good and indicates he doesn't violate any of the commandments. He doesn't steal or commit adultery, etc. His problem was that he was a decent man who was convinced that being perfectly good was actually possible and that he had achieved that status. The score that he kept convinced him that everything was right between him and God. The man so trusted **in himself** that he thought he had no need for the grace of God. The tax collector, on the other hand, knew he was spiritually lacking in boxes checked. He cannot rely on the things he has done. He was there because of a realization that he knew he was in trouble. He knows he needs to change his ways and that in order to change he has to trust in the only thing he had to trust—the grace of God. The Pharisee is “proud” of himself in the wrong way. He comes to God proud of his moral accomplishments, proud of virtues achieved by hard work and personal discipline. His putative moral success implies, most ironically, that he doesn't need God: his own righteousness is quite sufficient. This tax collector, on the other hand, comes to God with the only virtue he has: the fact that he knows how much he needs God's forgiveness. His only place to stand is in the mercy of God. This is not self-deprecation. This is a desperate plea to the one he trusts. This represents deep humility born in the awareness that nothing we do can ever earn us the love of

God. And nothing we ever do can deny us the love of God. In a sense this is a story about pride and humility as a superficial reading indicates. But, more accurately, it's about a certain kind of pride and a certain kind of humility. C.S. Lewis in a well known work of Christian apologetics titled *Mere Christianity* devotes an entire chapter to this kind of pride. In making his point he capitalizes the "P" in pride. According to Lewis, this "capital P" Pride is nothing less than "the essential vice, the utmost evil." "Pride," he writes, "leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind." According to Lewis, not all pride is this bad type of pride. The pride Lewis is speaking of is the pride which puts us in competition with everyone else's pride—it is essentially competitive—have to have more or be greater than. The Pride of bragging rights. The Pride which keeps score. This pride is not simply that of having something, but in having more than someone else. It is comparison that makes you proud and creates enmity. The enmity created is not only between you and others, but it is also between you and God. This is because in God you come up against something that is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know that God as that superior—and, therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison—you cannot know God at all. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and as long as you are looking down all the time, you cannot see something that is above you. In this parable the Pharisee blatantly compares himself with others, first with others in the general sense—thieves, rogues, and adulterers, specifically. He claims moral superiority over them and then points out "this tax collector" praying at the other end of the temple. This shows how the Pharisee has separated himself from others. Then Jesus concludes this story by pointing out that he has also separated himself from God. Jesus concludes the parable this way, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other. Justified that is, in relationship with God. The Pharisee's issue was that he was convinced his justification came from within—in those things he was proud of being able to do. Justification does not come from within us but only from God's grace. In the three verses I added to the lectionary passage, Jesus speaks of the way that one needs to come to God—like a child. To me the proximity of these verses to the parable is important. This connects to the parable we just studied. The child is dependent and recognizes the dependence upon parents—that is the key to the issue of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee kept score. He depended upon himself and his righteousness and was not justified before God. The tax collector knew his actions had gained him no points. He depended upon God and therefore went home justified—in a right relationship with God. Keeping score of our good deeds does not count before God because God knows us completely. We can never accumulate the points which could win for us what is a gift. We are blessed to have a God who comes down to meet us, in whom we can trust when our righteousness does not avail. Thanks be to God.