

Making Comparisons

Making comparisons seems to be an innate, intrinsic function of the way we look at the world...and at each other. For some reason when I began reading this parable this week, I thought back to some early...I think it was some third grade...grammar lessons...which were in the form of drills...you had groups of items you had to arrange and rank, you were to place them in the proper order...ascending or descending...according to whether they were good, better, best, or less, lesser, least. There were no examples given of items of equal value, no illustrations of equality. And that does seem to have set the stage for the way we look at and judge the world around us. The eighteenth chapter of Luke begins with a parable whose introduction seems straightforward. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Yet with this introduction, within the parable itself about the widow and the unjust judge there is no mention of prayer. Only at the end do prayer and faith both get mentioned where there is an implied comparison and a rhetorical question. Today, our text again begins with an introduction. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Prayer is not mentioned as the subject of the parable, yet the content of the parable is prayer. The parable compares two men and the prayers which they bring before God. Both the men and the prayers made are quite different. The parable Jesus tells briefly describes two men and their stations in life: "one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." The probable expectation of those first hearing the parable is that the Pharisee's prayer, representing a well respected religious leader's prayer would be the one which should elicit praise from Jesus at the end of the parable...except that throughout the gospels we have come to expect that Jesus is often critical of the Pharisees, so are expectations are that Jesus will be critical of the Pharisee. We expect there will be something amiss in what the Pharisee does. The introduction given here actually prepares us for that outcome and hints at the issue Jesus is going to illustrate. The gospels continually accuse the Pharisees of hypocrisy. But that does not seem to be the issue here. Here the Pharisee's prayer is not at all hypocritical. He firmly believes in the truth of the prayer he is making. Here the Pharisee functions as the embodiment of self-justification. The Pharisee is described as standing by himself. He has separated himself from "others". The position he takes illustrates his view that he is different from "those others." The prayer of thanksgiving he addressed to God went like this: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." From this self-congratulating opening, it is clear that this Pharisee is quiet good at that grammar drill of making comparisons and has determined that his status is clearly on the top end of the spectrum of the good, better, best range. He is also demonstrating the characteristics of that introduction—it is clear that as he is standing there, he can observe that other man who has come to the temple to pray. He even names him, not by name but by his status as a tax collector, a position within Jewish society universally held in contempt. And he is regarding him with contempt, glad that he is not like him, lumping him with the broad group of "others" that he is "not like". The Pharisee's prayer continues: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." The Pharisee tells God about his righteousness—he trusts in the things that he does—his actions—or as Jesus phrased it: he trusted in himself that he was righteous. Now, it is clear from the set up of this parable, that the Pharisee has got something wrong. But what is

it? The Pharisee in the parable isn't wrong to be grateful that he isn't a tax collector; that he doesn't have to work for the Roman oppressor; that he isn't a thief, or any of those other things. It wasn't wrong to be grateful that his faith, his privilege, and his values took him in a different direction; gave him a better life. It is not wrong to be grateful for the gifts in his life which have come from God. However, this prayer does not seem to be an expression of gratitude for those gifts. Where he is wrong is to assume that it is his actions, his deeds which will bring him God's mercy. In his view, it is his actions, his fasting and tithing which give his life value to God. He trusts in his works, not in God's love and promises given in the covenant relationship. He is also wrong to assume that the tax collector's life is of less value to God. Or that the tax collector's prayer is of less value to God or is less likely to be heard than his because of his fasting and tithing. He trusts in himself; not in his relationship with the God of the covenant who promises to be with him and grant mercy. Of course, in the parable there were two men who lifted prayers to God...very different prayers. The tax collector, we are told is standing far off, and not even lifting his head to look up to heaven. The position of the tax collection is also very telling. His is the position of a petitioner. Additionally, he is beating his breast, a sign of grief and repentance. The prayer the tax collector lifts to God is much shorter and makes no comparisons to any others. It is simply this: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This man's approach to God is an appeal for mercy, for rescue, for salvation. From the position of his body to the words he speaks, he recognizes that his hopes depend upon God's mercy, not upon his own ability to achieve righteousness. The tax collector's prayer makes no claims about his righteousness. In fact, this man by taking the office of tax collector he knows he has done much to offend the law of Israel. For this reason, when he comes to the temple he stands back, hardly daring to approach, and throws himself on the mercy of the Lord. While the Pharisee made his prayer of thanksgiving, it actually did not give thanks to God for the gifts he received; the Pharisee did not recognize that he had been the recipient of gifts; he saw his world as perfect because of his own efforts and does not perceive that he might have a need that only God can fill. On the other hand, the tax collector is desperately aware of his need for God's mercy. He confesses his sin, and asks for mercy. The parable concludes "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." If we leave the parable at this point, we may overlook some important aspects. We may conclude that the Pharisee got it all wrong while the tax collector got it all right. And in doing so, we may miss the main point of the parable. Point one begins the parable: We need to be thankful to the giver for all the gifts, and not assume that we in any way earn them. The Pharisee's error. Point two. Like the tax collector we need to recognize our sin, and ask for God's mercy, but the tax collector did not see God's help to change. The prayer of the tax collection has no indication of repentance, of transformation within that sinfulness to which the tax collector confessed. Point three. We need to remember that the emphasis in the closing line is about those who "exalt themselves being humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." The Pharisee assumes the tax collector is beyond God's mercy. How often do we look at others and assume the same? For the greatest difference between the prayers of these two praying men lies in this: one has written the other off, while the other can speak only of his own brokenness. This parable presents us with a challenge to look at our own prayers and attitudes and how we express both contrition and contempt about our neighbors—those both near and far. It is a parable about

true thankfulness, humble contrition which God desires verses the self-esteem that becomes arrogance and poisons a life of faith and service. We need to remember that our God's mercy is abundant and beyond our understanding; crosses our boundaries and does not recognize the barriers we establish with our comparisons and systems of good, better and best or less, lesser and least. Thanks be to God and God's mercy.