

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to the directors of Lake Joseph Community Church for their kind invitation to return to beautiful Muskoka and to participate in the worship this morning. I am pleased to be among a rota of outstanding clergy this summer, and I am particularly proud to be among five who are either graduates of or teach at Wycliffe College.<sup>1</sup> I have been told that I would be permitted to indulge in a brief moment of shameless promotion, although I hope this will not undermine the message I feel called to proclaim to you in my sermon!

And so I want to bring greetings from the College. I am happy to report that Wycliffe continues to thrive. With an enrolment of 250 students drawn from a variety of countries and denominations, Wycliffe is the largest Anglican seminary in North America. We are looking forward to welcoming 64 new students in just a week's time. You may be interested to know that half of our students are women and that the average age is in the mid-30s. Students come through a variety of means, chiefly on the recommendation of a minister or friend. So, if you happen to know someone who is thinking, or should be thinking, of theological education, encourage them to check us out.<sup>2</sup>

Wycliffe endorsed an ambitious strategic plan in November. Not only are we wanting to expand the range of our teaching, making theological education more accessible to lay people and students learning at a distance, we aim at becoming an internationally known centre for Scripture study and ministry excellence. And we are looking for partners who can support us prayerfully and financially. I stand ready to ply you with information at the door, after the service.

Now, did you hear about the time the Pope was being driven somewhere in the Italian countryside, but decided he'd rather do the driving himself? He put the chauffeur in the back seat and tore away like a madman. After a few miles of scattered chickens and burned rubber, a policeman pulled him over. When the policeman had had a good look in the car, he got on the radio to his chief:

'Hello, chief? Listen, I've pulled over a *really* important guy, and I don't know what to do,' he said anxiously.

'How important is he?' asked the chief, 'Is he more important than the mayor?'

'He must be . . . , ' came the reply.

'Is he more important than the governor?'

'I believe so . . . , ' the policeman answered, the anxiety rising in his voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Shepherd, Tim Houghton, Judy Paulson and Dale Rose.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wycliffecollege.ca>.

‘Well, he can’t be more important than the president!’ the chief barked. ‘Just who is he?’

‘Chief, I don’t know who he is,’ exclaimed the troubled policeman, ‘but the Pope is his chauffeur!’

Society is largely based on an intricate and delicate system of assigned importance. Even we who enjoy the freedom of living in a so-called ‘classless society’ cannot escape the reality of a social hierarchy which discriminates on the basis of education, occupation, income, heredity, gender and race. This structure is something in which we all take a part, and is reflected in the circle of friendships we maintain and in the activities we enjoy.

Of course, it was the Marxist dream that all social distinctions would one day be destroyed. Utopian communists proposed measures such as (and here I quote *The Communist Manifesto*) ‘the abolition of the distinction between town and country, of the family, of the carrying on of industries for the account of private individuals, and of the wage system’, and they looked forward to a time when they could issue a ‘proclamation of a social harmony’. But the dramatic collapse of the Berlin wall, thirty years’ ago this coming November, demonstrated just how unrealistic this vision of a classless society was. For one of its most fundamental errors was in supposing that human beings could easily resist the urge to seek preferment and to show favouritism. In other words, it did not reckon with our natural impulse to compare ourselves with others.

This inclination did not escape Jesus’ notice. Even among his closest disciples, Jesus saw a fair bit of one-upmanship and jockeying for position. Who would be permitted to sit at Jesus’ right and left in the Kingdom, some of them wanted to know.<sup>3</sup> If you remember this story, you will recall that Jesus rebuked the disciples’ shameless greed and ambition, since these things have no place in the society which he established. For the structures of the Kingdom are not founded on anything which human beings are capable of achieving; but rather on the mercy of God alone.

This really is what is behind our parable this morning. And in order that this hard but simple truth might become etched on our hearts, I want to spend a few moments exploring this story with you.

The parable begins, ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector’ (18.10). Now, an ancient Jew would have no difficulty in picturing such a scene, and in deciding beforehand who was going to come out best in the story. Clearly, it was the Pharisee, and not the tax collector.

Of course, tax collectors are unpopular figures in any society. But it is hard to imagine a circumstance where they could be more despised than in Israel of Jesus’ day. Here’s why: the Palestine of first century Judaism was governed by the Romans. They had marched into the

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 10.35-45.

neighbourhood about a hundred years earlier, deposing the local leadership, and stationing troops and outposts throughout the region. The Jews deeply resented their intrusion, and resisted every point of contact with these godless overlords. Of course, this was a bit of a challenge since the custom among occupiers was to exact tribute from the people that they had subjugated.

However, the Romans employed a shrewd tactic for collecting monies. They put the job up for tender among the locals. Locals knew the people and their ways, were less likely to be deceived, and in the case of Judaea, it would mean that Jews could surrender their taxes to another Jew, and thus wouldn't be forced into direct contact with Romans.

Now you may wonder why anybody would consider bidding for such a job. It would mean acting as an agent for the hated Roman government among your own people, and it would require you to associate with the unclean Gentiles. The answer is that the job was very lucrative. For as long as the government got their share, you could collect as much as you wanted from folk and claim the overage as your commission. Which is, of course, one *more* reason why tax collectors were detested.

These *publicani*, as the Romans called them, were at the bottom of the Jewish social scale: they were regarded as traitors, extortionists, unprincipled, sullied and greedy. The little phrase 'tax collectors and sinners'<sup>4</sup> which we find some ten times in the New Testament, was uttered in one breath, for in the estimation of first-century Jews, the terms were synonymous. Tax collectors were the *mafioso* of the ancient Jewish world. I don't know who we could compare him to today, but we might imagine, say, a gang member who extorted money from small businesses. I doubt we would flinch if, at the end of the story, God blasted him.

The Pharisee, by contrast, was an upright and honourable chap. The very name 'Pharisee' meant either 'separated one' or 'holy one'. One ancient historian described them as 'extremely influential among the common people'.<sup>5</sup> But this fellow was an exemplar even among his peers. He not only followed the demands of the Jewish law, he exceeded them. The law only required fasting a few times a year; he fasted twice a week. The law required that he give ten percent of his income back to God; he appears to have given not only ten percent of what he earned, but also ten percent of everything he bought! His lifestyle was disciplined and wholesome: he was not greedy, he dealt fairly with people, and he was faithful to his wife. He was a fine example of someone we might hail as a good Christian man. If he were an Anglican, I might suggest he become a Lay Reader or give him pamphlets on Wycliffe College and urge him to consider ordination. At the very least, I would want him to head up the stewardship programme!

Of course, one ought to be wary of appearances. After all, appearances can deceive.

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<sup>4</sup> τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 17.42.

What about someone's *real* piety? Is there some way to look into the human heart? As Jesus continues the story, he lets us eavesdrop on their prayers. The Pharisee's prayer is one of gratitude: *'I thank you, God, that I am not like the rest of mankind — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or, for that matter, like this tax-collector,'* he adds, glancing backwards.

Well this intercession is spoken proudly and eloquently. The Pharisee is obviously a man well acquainted with prayer, and he approaches God with confidence, certain of God's continued favour in his life. His manner now confirms our suspicion that he is a godly and righteous man. And those listening to the story, perhaps we among them, might regard him as a paragon of the devout life, and we might think how much better the Church, or even our society might be with more like him.

But then Jesus turns his attention to the tax collector. The tax man's prayer is pathetic by comparison. He stands a good distance back from the Pharisee and cannot look God in the eye, as it were. Beating his breast in remorse he prays, simply: *'God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am.'*

Well, what can we say to that? It is a weak and snivelling example. There's no boldness to it; no *'Dear Lord, thank you that I am a tax collector. Somebody's got to do it. Please bless my labours.'* He might even have said, *'O God, I want to be more like that Pharisee. Help me to be like him!'*

We should not be surprised to hear Jesus conclude that God sent the tax collector packing, while he rewarded the Pharisee with great spiritual blessing. But then Jesus finishes his story by saying, *'I tell you, [the tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the [Pharisee].'*

Jesus' conclusion to this story came as a shock to his listeners — particularly to those who were good Jewish Pharisees. And it should come as a shock to us today — particularly if we are good Christians. For we have grown accustomed to think, as the Pharisees did, that God rewards piety and punishes impiety. We just naturally assume that if somebody comes to church regularly, plays their part in the programmes of the parish, deposits a fair amount in the collection plate every week, says grace before meals and is nice to their neighbours, then he or she must be a Christian and can go home from church 'justified' as Jesus puts it.

But there is a great danger in thinking this way. And that danger is that in judging ourselves and others using such outward criteria, we set our own standards and, ultimately, become our own gods.

See how this is implied in the passage. The account begins by saying that Jesus was addressing certain people who *'trusted in themselves'* (18.9). That is to say, they didn't place their trust in God. The *Revised English Bible* describes them as *'those who were sure of their own goodness and looked down on everyone else'*. Or in verse 11, Jesus tells us that *'the Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself'*. Here the Greek is slightly ambiguous, for it could

be translated, 'The Pharisee stood, praying *this to himself*', which raises the question of who he was really praying to.<sup>6</sup>

I don't know about you, but I find this convicting, for my own prayers can sound too self-congratulatory, and it may reasonably be asked whether or not I am praying to the Creator of the universe or to a tiny god of my own invention.

Of course, it really is very foolish to trust ourselves or to pray to ourselves because, in the end, we cannot save ourselves. Only God can do that. And if God does save us, it is not because we have earned or deserved salvation as a reward. It is only because he is 'infinite in mercy'. Piety is not a *prerequisite* of God's mercy; it is meant to be a *response* to God's mercy. In other words, God does not love us because we are good; what goodness we exhibit is only possible because God loves us.

One of my favourite examples in literature of the truly pious man is the Vicar of St Botolph's in George Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*, a man aptly-named Mr Farebrother. He is the model of humility, for the simple reason that he had, as Eliot describes him,

[. . .] escaped the slightest tincture of the Pharisee. By dint of admitting to himself that he was too much as other men were, he had become remarkably unlike them in this — that he could excuse others for thinking slightly of him, and could judge impartially of their conduct even when it told against him.<sup>7</sup>

So, since the Kingdom of God is not built on human effort or obedience, but rather on the mercy of God, we ought to repent of any smugness about how good we are as Christians. There is no class society in the Church; there are no grounds for discrimination or favouritism. For we are all sinners in need of the powerful mercy of God. Jesus concludes, in Eugene Peterson's memorable paraphrase, 'If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face' (v. 14).<sup>8</sup>

Did you hear the one about the church-goer that died and went to heaven? When he got to the pearly gates he met St Peter, and asked if he might be admitted.

'What was the name?' asked the Saint.

'Bramwell', came the reply, 'James P.'

'Hmmm', went the Apostle, 'Bramwell . . . , "Emmy Lou", "Fredrick", "Geraldine", "Hortense", "Irving", . . . "James M." . . . . Nope. I'm sorry, but there doesn't appear to be a "James P.". Are you sure you've come to the right place?'

'Of course, I'm sure!' the man shot back, 'There must be some mistake!'

Peter shook his head doubtfully.

<sup>6</sup> NRSV: 'The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus': NIV: 'The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself'; AV: 'The Pharisee stood and prayed this with himself' (ὁ Φαρισαῖος σταθεὶς πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ταῦτα προσήχετο).

<sup>7</sup> Wordsworth edn (Ware, 1994; orig. 1872), p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> *The Message* (2002).

'Look', the man pleaded, 'You *must* know me. I was baptised and confirmed. I was very active in my church. I rarely missed a Sunday. I was the chief steward on our board twice, for heaven's sake!'

Peter was unmoved.

'C'mon!' bawled the man, 'I was a generous contributor! Look! They're putting a stained-glass window in the church in my memory even as we speak!'

The man pointed downwards, peering anxiously through the mists. But when he looked up again, both Peter and his vision of heaven had disappeared.

+Stephen Andrews

Lake Joseph Community Church