

Stand Out Righteousness

A sermon on Luke 18: 9-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 23 October 2022

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Message

God invites us into a journey of healing, growth and reconciliation, and values our engagement with that journey far above our individual accomplishments.

Sermon

On Friday night at the Baptist Union Assembly gathering, there was a strong sense of us-and-them as we debated the proposed changes to the Union Constitution, changes that I'm sorry to say were approved by the vote on the night despite being so un-Baptist. I didn't speak in the debate, but I had worked with a group of others to help prepare statements that they delivered. There were nine people who spoke against the changes and only four who spoke in support of them, but the sense of us-and-them was such that one of those four called us a "well organised cohort of naysayers", which was fair enough, because we were. It was nice of him to note that we were "well" organised!

I try hard to resist getting hooked into us-and-them thinking, but I wasn't very successful on Friday night. I noticed that the four speakers for the other side were all current or past pastors of large Bible-belt churches, two of them in the mega-church range. And I found myself inwardly imputing motives to them based on the value systems of those kind of churches. There was a whole lot of "our kind of churches" verses "those kind of churches" oppositional thinking going on in my head, and in a week where I'm preparing to preach on tonight's gospel reading, I'm extra aware of what an unhealthy pattern of thinking I was spiralling into. "Thank you God that I am not like those people"

Tonight's gospel reading is a good example of a story that is almost impossible for us to hear with anything like the force that it had for its first hearers. Many of the sayings and stories of Jesus recorded in the gospels have now been overlaid with later understandings, and we hear them filtered through another two thousand years of accumulated meanings and perceptions. This story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple is a classic case.

You know those children's plays where you are supposed to cheer for the good guy and boo every time the villain comes on stage? We hear this story a bit like that. We are now so used to thinking of the Pharisees as the evil opponents of Jesus that the minute we hear the word "Pharisee", we are ready to boo. Bad Guy! No question. And when we hear tax-collector, we are prepared to be a bit sympathetic. Probably a downtrodden outcast in need of a fair go.

The word Pharisee is even used outside the church now to describe those who are legalistic, self-righteous and wowserish. Often to describe people inside the church, actually!

In Jesus's day though, the Pharisees were certainly not seen as the bad guys by the average Israelite. Far from it. To many people, the Pharisees were quite heroic. They were the ones who had led the resistance to the watering down of the faith by Greek and Roman culture. They were the energetic defenders of the unique faith and culture of the people of God.

The Sadducees on the other hand were seen as majorly compromised. They were the ones who had traded religious integrity for wealth and power. The Sadducees were in bed with

Rome and doing very nicely out of it, and the ordinary people regarded them as corrupt fat-cats and had very little admiration for them. But the Pharisees were never accused of religious laxness or compromise. They were the heroes of the true faith in those days.

Even the conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus is probably greatly exaggerated in our minds. Those of you who have devout Jewish friends will know that most of them love nothing more than a good argument over matters of religion. And the willingness to engage you in such an argument is a mark of respect. There was a great deal of argument and a great deal of respect between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus had far more in common with the Pharisees than with any of the other known parties within first century Judaism.

The difficulty for us now is that when we hear this story through our long accustomed dislike of Pharisees and sympathy for tax-collectors, there is nothing in it that shocks us or unsettles us. We hear the punch line – the tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee – and we think, “and that’s just as it should be too.”

Let me give you a tip: any time you hear a parable of Jesus and think, “Yeah, that’s just as it should be too”, you probably haven’t heard it right. You’ve probably missed the point.

We hear the Pharisee’s prayer with disgust. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” “What an arrogant prick,” we think.

We Australians are especially allergic to such self-aggrandisement. We find it hard to imagine that such a prayer out loud in public could be anything but obnoxious. But actually, it was far from unusual. Rather than being especially arrogant, it was more or less one of the prescribed prayers that he was required to pray on entering the temple or synagogue.

One version recorded in the Talmud goes like this:

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, that you have set my portion with those who sit in the house of study and you have not set my portion with those who sit in street corners, for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise for the words of Torah and they rise for frivolous talk; I labour and they labour, but I labour and receive a reward and they labour and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the future world, and they run to the pit of destruction.

Those who first heard Jesus tell this story would have been very familiar with such prayers and wouldn’t have regarded them as arrogant at all. The pharisee is giving appropriate thanks to God for the blessings of being able to enter the house of God and study the word of God.

The suggestion that a sinner who collaborated with the Romans would be favoured more highly by God than this truly devout hero of the faith would have shocked Jesus’s hearers almost beyond belief.

So, if we try to factor the shock back into it, what are we supposed to make of it? What is Jesus wanting to say to us? Let me suggest that it might not be quite as straightforward as a simple contrast between pride and humility. The Pharisee is very pleased with his own religious success, and the tax-collector sounds full of remorse, but that’s not all that is apparent here, and I think there is something else that is a very important part of the picture.

There is a dynamic that has to do with the way they do or don't regard each other, a dynamic that I fell into on Friday night.

The Pharisee looks around and finds a person who embodies all he wants to distinguish himself from. "Thank you God that I am not like that scumbag over there. I do what is right. He does evil."

Now it is quite likely, and even probable, that what the Pharisee is saying and thinking is pretty much true. But a factual truth and an emotional and spiritual failure can go hand in hand. He has used his religious framework to divide the world up into simple categories of good and bad, and located the bad entirely in other people.

He's by no means on his own. This is almost completely normal, and that is integral to Jesus's point. More often than not, we identify the evils with which we struggle in other people and then attack them there. It is those people who are the cause of all our problems. If we could just get rid of them, then we'd all be so much more able to get on with serving God properly.

And of course, if we respond to this story by secretly praying "Thank you God that I am not like that Pharisee," then we have undoubtedly fallen into the exact same error. And yet it is subtle isn't it, because Jesus himself is clearly saying that the Pharisee is wrong, so it is not as simple as saying you can't make a judgement and name a wrong. It is not an absolute catch 22.

The trouble is, when we only identify evil in other people, we become part of the problem, not part of the solution. We drive a wedge between ourselves and them. If I had got to my feet on Friday night and given voice to what was going on in my head, that's exactly what would have been happening. Divisions would have deepened.

When we identify sin only others, we are very unlikely to succeed in getting them to face up to the sins we have named. Usually it just gets them to retaliate instead and to point out our sins and our hypocrisy. In the end nobody is identifying any problem behaviour they can do anything about. We are all identifying other people's issues and no one is identifying and tackling their own. We are all adding to the sum total of anger and hostility and divisiveness in the world, and nobody is owning anything or doing anything about their own contribution to it.

As St Augustine said when preaching on this story, we end up like people who go to a doctor and are so busy crowing about how much sicker than us everyone else is, that we forget to describe our own symptoms and so we leave the doctor's without a cure.

Probably the most admirable thing about the tax collector in this story, is that he doesn't buy into this tit-for-tat game. No doubt he hears the put down in the all too public prayer of the Pharisee, but he doesn't retaliate. Rather than angrily point out the speck in the Pharisee's eye, he humbly attends to the log in his own. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

He is commended, I suggest, not only for his humble facing up to his own sin, but for his resisting of the temptation to retaliate to the provocative one-up-man-ship of the Pharisee. Like Jesus himself, he absorbs the insult and doesn't return it, and so he contributes to draining the swamp of hatred and divisiveness.

Jesus invites us all into a journey of transformation, and a major part of that journey is facing up to the ways that we contribute in our own little ways to the sum total of hatred and hostility and divisiveness in the world. Unless we get to the point of acknowledging that our contribution to the problem, even if not as big as someone else's, is just as important as anybody's and is the only bit that we are entirely responsible for doing anything about, then we can't even begin, and we will remain part of the problem. I didn't jump to my feet on Friday night, but I need to recognise that just under the surface there was a whole cesspool of arrogant and divisive thoughts which still need to be addressed. That's the one part of the overall problem that I am definitely in a position to do something about. And you can do something about your part.

That's why here in our worship, even though it is much more fashionable these days to see ourselves as the victims of a bad environment, we still offer up prayers that confess that we have sinned and that we need forgiveness and reconciliation. The danger of course, is that we pray those prayers while thinking of people other than ourselves who seem to fit them, instead of examining ourselves to see honestly where they address us. But if we pray them with our focus in the right place, we will recognise them as an important challenge to us ourselves, and as a call to number ourselves among those in need of healing and forgiveness and transformation.

It is then there in that place, on our knees in sorrow over our enmeshment in the hostile divisive patterns of us against them thinking and us against them behaviour, that we will find Jesus at our sides with an arm around our shoulders and the words of forgiveness on his lips. And as we choose his path of forgiveness rather than our old paths of accusation, resentment, and contempt, we will hear him say to us, "Arise and be at peace. Your sins are forgiven. You may go on your way, put right by God."