

# Self-Esteem for Sinners

*A sermon on Luke 18: 9-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 23 October 2016*

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## Message

A healthy self-esteem is not one that thinks itself better than others, but one that, in solidarity with others, accepts the merciful gift of life and love that Jesus offers us.

## Sermon

I don't know whether Jesus did much drawing, but I reckon he would have made a great cartoonist. You see, cartoons usually take certain characteristics of someone and they blow them up out of proportion, both in the pictures and the words. What we end up with is a characterisation – an image of someone based on one or two characteristics with everything else about them left out.

Story tellers do this too, and Jesus did it often in his parables. If Jesus wants to illustrate two attitudes in prayer he creates a story with two characters and they each embody one attitude or the other. For the purpose of the story, they have no other characteristics.

In the story we just heard, Jesus characterises a non-too-subtle self-assurance. A pharisee, one of the devout Jewish religious experts, standing in the temple praying out loud a prayer commending himself to God. “God I thank you that I’m not like other people. I thank you that I’m better than other people. Especially that bloke over there.” And he goes on to list a number of his religious observances as evidence of his virtue in case God had not been giving him enough attention.

Another preacher compared this to the queen in the Snow White story. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the most virtuous of them all?” “Me. Me. Me. O God, thank you that I’m not like other people.”

But let’s try to be fair to this pharisee bloke. His strict observance of the laws and practices of his religion were not something to be sneezed at. He carefully refrained from many commonplace activities that he saw as unworthy of a follower of God, and he had conscientiously sought to maintain a purity of mind and actions. And if you don’t deserve a bit of a pat on the back for all that, then nobody does. His self-assurance was built on a solid foundation of hard work, diligent study, and admirable self-control, and why shouldn’t he feel that he can stand before God with his head held high?

Meanwhile in the corner there’s another guy, a tax-collector, which basically in those days meant a government backed stand-over man, who is praying a very different prayer. A prayer that many psychologists and self-esteem gurus would probably say was beating himself up with an exaggerated sense of unworthiness. “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

But, says Jesus, it’s him who goes home put right with God, despite the fact that all the things that the pharisee listed in his own favour were undoubtedly true. Once again Jesus is talking about the radically upside down values system of the culture of God. The roles are reversed. The one who pleads for mercy because he has no virtues goes home justified, accepted by God. The one who has many virtues and who is guilty of no more than a tendency to parade them because he can, goes unheard by God.

Now I reckon this confronts us with some big questions. You see, I've spent some time in psychotherapy and I know that one of the greatest obstacles to personal growth is a low self-esteem, a negative self-image. If you spend all your time castigating yourself for your failures, for your character flaws, for your less admirable acts, then it tends to become debilitating and instead of becoming a spur to change and growth it becomes paralysing and self-centred. And if you never give yourself credit for your accomplishments, never engage in a bit of positive self-affirmation, then you are in real danger of becoming morose and negative, and ultimately an unpleasant depressing sod who nobody wants to be around.

Now if that is true, then what are we to make of Jesus affirming the bloke who can describe himself only as a sinner, and dismissing the man who has conscientiously set about achieving a high degree of personal virtue? Well, let me have crack at addressing that dilemma. Let's look again at the pharisee's prayer and read it in light of a belief that self-esteem is a good thing.

"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."

There are two types of things you can say to yourself if you are seeking to affirm yourself and pat yourself on the back. You can boost yourself up a bit by reminding yourself of something good in yourself or something good you have achieved – and the pharisee does that – "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

Or you can put someone else down so that you'll look better in relation to the rest of the pack. The pharisee does that too – "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He makes himself look good by putting everyone else down.

What we are seeing in this second approach is surely a serious sin that he's blinded himself too, and arguably even the root of most sin. He is dividing and separating in ways that break relationship and the possibility of relationship. He is focussing attention on our differences in order to elevate one and put down the other. And if you think of almost any situation you can imagine in which one person or group is hurt by another, within it you will find that one side has defined the other side as somehow different and inferior and therefore as not worthy of respect or regard.

This is a lot more common than we like to imagine. When I watch the news, I often find that I react with more concern to a report of a cyclone in Queensland than I do to reports of a hurricane in Haiti. Something in my head has separated those groups off into my group and another group that doesn't matter as much. I am subtly denying my basic human solidarity with people in Haiti. I might as well be standing up in the temple praying out loud, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like those Haitians."

Racism, sexism, elitism, denominationalism, any kind of -ism you like; all of them treat a group of people as inferior to our group of people. All of them divide and separate and tear apart relationships. They fragment and destroy humanity and in the process they fragment and destroy our souls. And as often as not what is at the root of them is just a simple desire to

make myself feel better by convincing myself that no matter how unsure I might be about my own worth, someone else is worth less than me.

Now back to the other way of affirming yourself – reminding yourself of something good about yourself or something good that you’ve done. Now I’d argue that this is a perfectly OK thing to do, so long as you’re careful that that is all you’re doing. It’s easy to con yourself.

I find it quite easy to say something like, “I’m a good person because I care about others and I’ve given to the Haiti Hurricane Relief Appeal,” which is a perfectly good thing to pat myself on the back for unless I’m carefully ignoring the fact that my self-talk actually continues and says, “and thank you God that I’m not like those people who don’t care and don’t give.” I’m quite successful at deluding myself.

But there’s another issue here for this bloke. Look what’s he’s congratulating himself for: “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” He’s congratulating himself for his dedicated practice of religious observances. Now there is nothing wrong with such religious observances, they are very valuable.

As someone whose pay depends on the church offerings, I’m not going to stand here and criticise a bloke for giving a tenth of all his income! But these kind of religious observances are the means to an end, they are not ends in themselves. If we regard them as values in themselves we usually undermine their very purpose.

Fasting has absolutely no value as an end in itself. You can go without food for the whole day tomorrow, or for two days a week for the rest of your life without any positive benefit at all. It will make absolutely no difference to the world’s food distribution problems. It may just make you grumpy and snappy, while everything else in the world will go on much as it always does.

However in partnership with God, fasting can be a valuable means to certain ends for some people. You can use it as an exercise in building self-discipline. You can use the hunger as a way of focussing your prayer and reflection for a day. You can use it as a method of self-exploration, of discovering more about how you cope with appetites and denials. You can use it as a way of building your empathy for those who suffer involuntary deprivations.

If you make genuine progress in some of those things, by all means pat yourself on the back. You have achieved something of value. But if all you have done is fasted, it’s not worth a cracker on its own.

Our church covenant calls us to a set of disciplines that we seek to live out together. But most of those disciplines have no intrinsic value of their own, they are simply means to another end, and the end is our formation as followers of Jesus and our progress in our journey together into the life of God. We don’t do these things because we reckon that we’ll be better than other people by doing those things. It is possible to be doing those things and be becoming a worse person.

We commit ourselves to these things in the belief that they will help to change us, and part of the change we would be hoping for is that we would stop comparing ourselves to other people! Such voluntary commitments are not for those who would claim they are strong, but for those who know they are weak and need all the help they can get.

And that brings us to the other fellow in Jesus's little cartoon story: the tax collector – head down in the corner beating his breast and praying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Certainly those could be the words of a person whose self-esteem is sick and dangerously self-destructive, especially if the emphasis of their words is falling on, “me, me, me, a sinner”.

But if the emphasis is falling on, “God, be merciful,” they could be the words of someone who has a much healthier than average understanding of the world and their own place in it. They could be the words of someone who has become aware of their own weakness before the seductive power of the hypnotic, high-tech entertainment culture all around us. They could be the words of someone who has seen that the only escape from hard-hearted greed and cynicism is to throw yourself completely on the mercy of the only one strong enough to break you free.

As our friends at the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting here this morning could tell you, no drunk ever becomes sober without admitting to being a drunk. If you can't face up to your starting point, the chances are you'll never make your destination either. The destination, the destiny, for which we were created is to follow Jesus into the limitless life and love of God.

Those who will enjoy such life and love with Jesus are those who know that they can't generate such life and love themselves. Knowing that they can't get themselves there, no matter how good they are, they entrust themselves to God's mercy as the only possible way they might find their way in to enjoying such a destiny. It's our destiny, but it's not our job. If you make it your job to climb to the top of the ladder, to reach the heights, then when Christ raises his people you'll find yourself looking like a child standing on a chair trying to touch the sky.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” With these words we embark on the journey of life in all its fullness, the journey to our ancient destiny, to be one with Christ Jesus our Lord.