

Sermon for October 23, 2016
"Why Didn't Jesus Like Religious Folk?"

Luke 18:9-14

Sometimes when Jesus taught, religious folk would come to hear him. You know the kind. The ones that have the biggest Bibles and always carry them around for all to see. People who are just a little too proud in the wrong way of their religion. People who think they have saved themselves with their own holiness. Well when these folks came around Jesus would tell a story that might have gone something like this:

"Once upon a time there were two men who went to church. One was a deacon in the church, a Sunday School teacher and a member of the Administrative Board. The other was a gangster who was into illegal gambling, drug dealing and who knows what else. The Sunday School Teacher sat on the front pew of the church and was always the first to stand up when the preacher said stand. When the preacher preached he would say "Amen" louder and more often than anyone else. Finally, when the preacher asked for prayer concerns he stood up and said, "I just want to thank the Lord that I was brought up in the church, and that I gave my life to God when I was only six and that I did not end up like those drug dealers and gang members out on the streets." The gangster however sat on the back pew and never said a word. He just hung his head and cried, "Lord, I've done wrong, please forgive me."

"I tell you it was the gangster that went home forgiven that Sunday rather than the Sunday School Teacher; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled for those who humble themselves will be exalted."

So why didn't Jesus like religious people? I mean, he was talking bad about the religious leaders. The Pharisees were the people who represented righteousness and justice and the laws of Moses. They were the preachers and doctors of theology and teachers. They studied God's word and told people to live right.

At the same time, he was talking bad about a Pharisees, he talked good about a tax collector! The tax collectors were the scum of the earth. They were first of all traitors to their community. They helped the Romans gather the money that was then used to feed the soldiers and pay for their weapons. What's worse they took a cut for themselves and often lived well off of it. So on top of being traitors, they were crooks too.

I tried to depict these realities in my little modernization of the parable. The Pharisees was the board members and Sunday School teacher. A person who leads the church and tried to live a religious life. The tax collector became the gangster. He was the scum of the earth that betrayed his community by selling drugs and stole from the poor and needy. And Jesus' parable seems to condemn the religious people while exalting the criminals.

But if you look closely at the parable it really isn't about religious vs. criminal. It begins by saying, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." It is really about self-righteousness. The Pharisees thought he had made himself righteous through his actions. He proudly boasted that he tithed and gave and worshipped regularly. He even fasted twice a week when only once was required.

The tax collector however confessed that he was not righteous. He humbled himself before God. He bowed his head and stood off at a distance from the center of the temple. In the temple in Jerusalem the Holy of Holies was the dwelling place of God and it was in the center of the temple. This repentant tax collector stood away from the center because he was truly ashamed and sorry for what he had done.

And it was the sinner who was made righteous. Well, maybe it was one of the sinners who was made righteous. You see the Pharisee was a sinner too. Maybe he didn't help the Romans or steal from widows, but he did fail to trust in God. He didn't confess his sin and ask for forgiveness while the tax collector did.

Perhaps the origin of this difference between the two is who they used to measure their behavior. You notice that the Pharisee compares himself to the thieves and adulterers. He thanks God that he is not like them. And it is true that he shouldn't be like them. But that is like a Ph.D. graduate comparing themselves to a 4th grader and saying, "Look how smart I am."

The tax collector on the other hand seems to have a higher standard. He could have said, "I may not be good, but I am not as bad as that person over there" and pointed to a criminal who had done worse things. Instead he just beats his breast and cries, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." Perhaps he was using the standard of God's law to measure his righteousness. And when he looked into the mirror of God's law he could see clearly how much of a sinner he really was.

So the Pharisees' error was that he compared himself to other people. And we do the same thing. Haven't you ever heard someone was "I ain't no saint, but I ain't like those people," and then they point to someone who is worse than they are? As Christians we are to judge our lives by Jesus. He is the perfect expression of the Word of God in the flesh. And compared to him we are all sinners in need of forgiveness.

So why didn't Jesus like religious folk? It's not so much that Jesus didn't like religious people as much as it is that he realized that the self-righteous really weren't – righteous that is. And it's the repentant sinner who is truly made righteous. That is the point of this parable. You can't make yourself righteous. I don't care if you fast three times a week and 20% to the church.

Only God can make us righteous. Only the Almighty can save us. We need to stop deluding ourselves into thinking we are righteous. We need to stop looking for someone worse than us to convince ourselves or others that we are righteous.

Let's take a lesson from the tax collector. We should confess that we're sinners. We should humble ourselves before God so that God can lift us up. Jesus said that the one who humbly confessed was the one who went home forgiven. When you leave here today, will you go home forgiven? You decide.