

## Meadowbrook congregational church

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“Better than You”

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### **Luke 18: 9-14**

*9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” <sup>13</sup>But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” <sup>14</sup>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.’*

I was listening to sports talk radio on my way home from the church the other night. The topic was something that particularly raised my ire. The host was pontificating about how the general public cared nothing about baseball. He said baseball was a dreadfully dull and boring game. He believed that whatever popularity it still had came solely from those living nostalgically, yearning for an earlier, simpler time. He pointed out that on last Sunday night a regular season NFL game featuring two mediocre football teams, the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Tennessee Titans had attracted more viewers than the American League Championship series involving the world champion New York Yankees.

This ranting was hard for me to hear. I was incensed. If I wasn't driving I would have started dialing the phone immediately. But to my delight someone did call in defending baseball. The caller was a genius! He spoke of the simple, pastoral appeal of the brown dirt and the green grass of a baseball diamond. He said people today are wrongly into more physically appealing things, like violence and noise and sex appeal—thus the popularity of football. He said that perhaps people didn't like baseball today because they are obsessed with instant gratification and can't take the time to watch something as intricate as baseball strategy unfold. He said that generally the American public wasn't smart enough to appreciate the great game of baseball. It takes intelligence and an ability to understand deep complexity to truly value the inner workings of the sport. He added that baseball is a dull, boring game only for those with shallow and simple minds and unfortunately that is most of the American public. He said that football was the sport for Wal-Mart and Costco shoppers while baseball fans were more likely to prefer Neiman Marcus or Saks. It was a sermon so inspiring it almost had me screaming “Amen!” from behind my steering wheel. I was thanking God that I was privileged, born with the brain and heart to fully appreciate this wonderful game. I am special. I am not like the rest!

And then the other shoe dropped. Immediately after hanging up the host put the caller in his place. He had words for such baseball fans as me. Arrogant. Hypocrites. Elitist. Snobs. Self-righteous. Baseball fans who claim the sport possesses some secret knowledge that is hidden from the uninformed are merely self-absorbed geeks who can't see their bad haircuts, horrible acne and dated clothes even while standing in front of a mirror. Wow! Was that really me? It was then I remembered the lesson that Jesus taught in the Scripture lesson we have heard this morning.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a parable of two men. One is a Pharisee, standing by himself in the temple. He is there to pray, but his prayer sounds more like a fortified resume than an honest confession. He recites a rather precise account of his religious standing. "I fast twice a week. I tithe of my income to the church." He seems to believe that in his faith and in his righteousness, he is special. He is pious, and in Jesus' day his listeners would have associated the Pharisee as a model of godliness and goodness. "God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of those other people." He assumes that all he has come to be is a product of what he has accomplished. He assumes that everyone else is wrong and evil and has fallen short in the eyes of God. One commentator I read this week humorously suggests that the Pharisee in the temple is "praying with himself" rather than "praying to God."

The other man is a tax collector. He doesn't want anyone's attention. He stands far off from the crowd. In Jesus' day the tax collector was a model of sin. They were in cahoots with the Roman authorities. They collected the taxes that people resented, something collecting a little more than necessary so they could line their own pockets. The tax collector doesn't offer to God as list of deeds for God to punish or approve. He doesn't compare his own misdeeds to the evils of others. He simply recognizes that he has sinned. He acknowledges God's forgiving nature and asks for mercy upon himself. Despite his sin, he displays a truly contrite heart.

Then Jesus springs one of the features of most good parables-the surprising reversal. The pious, passionate praying Pharisee goes home on God's bad list. His problem was that somehow in his goodness, he believed himself to be better than the rest of ragtag humanity. The sinful, despised tax collector goes home justified. His humility before God was not necessarily a great achievement- after all he was still a model of greed and dishonesty, but at least it was an honest assessment of his true situation.

As I reflect upon this parable, I think we have to be careful not to take our lesson too easily. We shouldn't be overly critical of the Pharisee. Apparently he was living a good life, following the will in God except for his habit of self-righteous thinking. And we shouldn't look to the tax collector as the perfect role model either. His humility before God was praised but at least in the story he never seemed to get too specific in his listing of misdeeds nor too overflowing in his acknowledgment of God.

Perhaps the key problem in the parable is the "better than you" attitude displayed by the Pharisee. He thought that in his own goodness, he was somehow different and better than everyone else. Sometimes it is a challenge not to let our virtues become our vices. Sometimes it is a challenge not to be so smug in our own goodness.

There are obvious situations where we stand with the Pharisee. We see how others have messed up their lives with poor decisions, weakness or moral failure. We are pleased with ourselves that we have not done likewise. We hear of friends or

acquaintances whose marriages have failed or who have lost their jobs due to poor performance. We take a deep breath and give thanks for our own success. We see others with clothing not as fine as ours, whose physical appearance is different than ours, whose manners and actions are embarrassing. We shake our heads in gratitude that somehow we are more comfortable, better looking, and worldlier and sophisticated. We believe that we understand what God truly demands and are shocked to see that others see God differently than we do. We might seethe with indignation condemning loudly or under our breath those who do not live the life of faith as successfully as we do.

In a sermon on this parable, Kierkegaard writes that both our sin and our attitude toward our virtues can separate us from our Creator. We always need to have a deep awareness of being in danger before God. Nothing we can do can make us safe before God- that is our own goodness will never leave us immune from God's judgment. God's demands of us are greater than our expectations. Yet God's love for us is also greater than our own.

Like the Pharisee we need to understand that our virtues are not achievements which have earned us favor with God. They are gifts from God, a God who loves us, who is gracious with us in our failure and sin, offering to us mercy and forgiveness, a God who is gentle with us in our self-righteous smugness, offering to us mercy and forgiveness. Our prayer each day should not be "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people." It should be "Lord, I give thanks that you are so good to me. Help me be good to others in the same way."