

## 1-31-21 Luke 18:9-14 NIV

Last week Jesus told a story about a judge and a widow. 2 people on opposite ends of society. The judge was powerful and didn't fear anyone including God and the widow was powerless—fearful of society B/C of her circumstances.

This parable is given to Jesus' followers to teach about our need to be bold and confident in prayer. This is to help us grow closer to God and in faith, but persistent prayer is also needed as the Body of Christ so we remain focused on Jesus-able to be obedient to our call. But today's parable warns against a totally different kind of bold confidence beginning in Luke 18:9-10

*"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.'"*

Pharisees were respected as righteous leaders in Jesus' day. They were deeply religious Jews who were committed to upright behavior believing in strict observance to their opinions about God's law. But this became their downfall B/C they aimed to follow SO carefully-they kept making laws to assure God's law was followed to the letter. This tripped people up and when it did-the Pharisees didn't hold back their criticism.

The tax collectors, on the other hand, followed another law ENTIRELY - the law of the Jew's Roman oppressors. It was their job to collect taxes for the Romans. Tax collectors weren't just hated because they were considered traitors-working for Rome. They were also considered cheaters-B/C they would sometimes assess more taxes than was required. If someone couldn't or wouldn't pay, they would turn him over to the soldiers =making tax collectors considered to be the scum of the earth.

So those listening to Jesus, would naturally assume that his story would put a black hat on the tax collector as being the bad guy in the story, but how wrong they would be. Jesus wanted to point out that we're to have confidence only in God and NOT ourselves or in what good we do.

The Pharisees formed this confidence B/C they thought their religious deeds made them righteous before God and they became bold in proclaiming that belief- while looking down on everyone else.

When we begin to take PRIDE in OUR religious knowledge or in our righteous behavior, we will find it very easy to look down on those who don't think, reason, or act as we do. And we can see how this has become true not only in our society, but in the Church as well. Christ say we're to love & welcome ALL people, but how many Christians look down and criticize people with tattoos, body piercings or outrageous clothing, Pregnant teenagers, Emigrants and illegal aliens,

People addicted too the many various things available to become addicted too. Those who are of a different skin color, culture, religion, economic level, or political party-Homeless people who many churches offer to help, but they don't exactly want them in their pews and sadly the list goes on and on.

Meaning, that Jesus is telling a story that is intended for OUR ears as well. We've seen all too well that WHEN people think of themselves, their needs, their actions, and opinions as MORE upright than other people's needs, actions, and opinions=it UNDERMINES the foundations of society

However, let's not fool ourselves B/C this can also undermine the church. For when we consider people that God made in HIS image to be INFERIOR to us, wrong, or unsuitable-we've proven that Jesus' teachings AREN'T worth listening to or worth following- why should others- if WE DON'T? And here is where Jesus again becomes a thorn in the Pharisees side as Jesus, the storyteller, sets the characters into action in vs.

*"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men -- robbers, evildoers, adulterers -- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"*

Jews often stood as they prayed; looking up to heaven, often with hands raised -saying their prayer out loud. What's unusual about THIS Pharisee= is that his entire prayer is about himself. He thanks God= not for blessings -but that he isn't a sinner like others that he goes on to mention: robbers, evildoers-which includes many people, adulterers & "This" tax collector.

But Jesus doesn't stop there, For the Pharisee also reminds God of how devout he is - fasting and tithing above what's required. This leads us to believe that his prayer ISN'T for God to hear, but for all those around him- so they know of his eminence.

As Jesus tells the story; I can almost hear a ripple of laughter sweep over the crowd. They all recognized & are amused by the comically exaggerated description of this Pharisee-except of course, the Pharisees who were also listening-I'm sure they were pretty mad. Then Jesus turns his focus in vs 13 *"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even look up to heaven, but beat his breast & said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"*

Notice the tax collector's posture. He stands at a distance. He doesn't feel worthy to draw close to the temple-where it was believed that God resided. His eyes aren't raised to heaven, a sign of his sense of guilt and he beat his breast a sign of sorrow B/C of internal torment.

First, he addresses God, just as the Pharisee had done. Next, instead of telling God all the good things about himself, he describes himself as a sinner. He doesn't make any excuses for his behavior, offers no justifying circumstances. He's confessing his sinfulness before God and takes FULL responsibility for it.

Finally, he asks for mercy & forgiveness from the One who has been wronged, & the one who the tax collector FEELS he's wronged THE most- is God. His prayer is a cry of the heart- O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Although, our tax collector sounds humble and repentant of his sins- the people listening WOULDN'T think that it was possible for him to be forgiven by God. But in vs. 14a- Jesus tells them the truth from God's PERSPECTIVE- *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."*

I can hear everyone GASP asking- *'Did Jesus just say that the TC found favor, was now right and restored before God?* This lesson on how God REALLY thinks- just turned their world upside down! Can you imagine the effect Jesus' parable had on the Pharisee's hearing this? If we think they were mad before, they're now LIVID. How about the crowd? Actually, I believe this was ESP. GN for the evildoers who were listening -for when the reality of what Jesus said SUNK in I can picture them weeping with JOY.

Jesus had JUST declared that it WAS possible for EVEN THEM to be forgiven, cleansed, & justified before God. There was HOPE for them yet! And I believe that THIS is the beauty of the parable & a point we REALLY need to think about & remember as WE go out to share Jesus' teachings or when people come here.

Jesus' story tells us that God provided sinners the ability to seek forgiveness from sin through his Son=then & the same still holds true today. Meaning no one is off limits- we must share the Word with everyone & welcome everyone in. And just as Jesus had given them hope & the self-righteous something to think about-we must work this out for ourselves too.

Finally, Jesus comes to the point of the parable in vs 14b, *"For everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled"*, this means that everyone who thinks THEIR power, fortune, position & self-centered opinions make them important- will in fact, be brought to their knees evidentially.

*"And those who humble themselves will be exalted."* Meaning everyone who has the TC's heart-a heart humbled by their sin- totally dependent on God's Mercy & grace- will be forgiven & welcomed to the family no matter who they are, what they look like or what they've done. Making "humble" our tool for this week. (African symbol- rams horns butting- Jesus washing feet)

Is Jesus trying to say that devoutness and obedience aren't needed? Of course not, but this parable DOES ask us to look within ourselves. For I believe that when we sincerely do, we will see both men there.

However, in seeing any evidence of the Pharisee-We're to seek God's help to REALIZE that self-righteousness, pride, & superiority= WILL ONLY cause conflict between neighbors, discontent among workers- both secular and church- hatred between races, nationalities, and ethnic groups -Sounds like what we're seeing today, doesn't it.

This is a terrible part of our human nature and as Christians we MUST want to focus on what is harmful in us, holding it up to Christ's light so we can SEE it with God's eyes, and turn away from it so we can look and be different than the self-righteous.

This is needed B/C we're being called to go out to scatter seeds & to be Christ's hands, heart and voice here & in our communities. For us to be effective, we must do this with a humble heart & spirit- using authentic words and actions.

If we don't, we will be seen as self-righteous hypocrites-not only wasting our time, but we might do more harm than good. So I ask us all to take the pondering questions in the bulletin seriously. Take them home reflect on them so we can be in the right frame of mind & spirit here & when we go out to join with the Spirit in God's earthly kingdom.

- Will we go home or about our daily lives living as forgiven and justified people-showing mercy to others-forgiving other imperfect people we live with or meet so God's love can be found and felt?
- Will we lean towards prayer and humility as we celebrate our differences?
- Will we commit to love all people-commit to try not to belittle or demean another human being?

Can you imagine if ALL Christians committed to doing this? Can you imagine the earth healing, relationships being strengthened-people caring- hands helping- love & kindness evident, society changing, and the church growing? I can ONLY pray that one day we won't have to imagine this, B/C we'll be living it. To God alone should all the glory and praise be given! Amen