“God’s Grace Makes Everyone Equal”

Luke 18:9-14

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How does one overcome the temptation to judge another? Perhaps by regularly praying, O God be gracious to me, a sinner. Please forgive me.

Jesus’ parable today is addressed to those who have confidence in themselves and judge others. Most of us at times think we are better than someone else or our group or country is better. Most of us at times think we are in control of our life. Some of us think that for the most part I am a pretty good, caring, loving person. Some of us try to be self-sufficient. The parable is specifically addressed to these thoughts. Everyone at times is the Pharisee in the parable. A Pharisee was a person of elite status, education, and respectability who knew and meticulously followed Mosaic law. Pharisees were viewed as model citizens.

In our parable the behavior of the pharisee and tax collector are exaggerated to grab our attention and contrast two rival thought patterns in each of us. During this first reading of the parable ponder the ways that you think like the Pharisee.

**Luke 18:9-14 NLT “Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

Comparing yourself to others is a sin. Comparing your group, team, or country to others is a sin. Comparing your generation to another generation is a sin. One compounds that sin if they think that their generation is in any way better than another generation. Comparing your political party to another party is a sin.

There is no need to compare, because every person is equal, a beloved, cherished child of God, a masterpiece of our Creator. None of our worth comes from what we do, how we behavior, or what we have. All our worth comes from God. All of us sin. All of us are saved by grace alone, the free gift of God’s love. No one can earn salvation. Being baptized or not, belonging to a religion or not, does not change anyone’s status, all are equal. No one is loved more or less by God. All are loved equally. What we do and believe does change our quality of life and the lives around us, however it does not change God’s love for us.

When you are tempted to compare, pray. O God be gracious to me, a sinner. Please forgive me. Tax collectors were despised, because many devout Jews regarded the paying of any tax to a foreign power as treason against God, any person participating in and profiteering from this system was considered a collaborator and a traitor. For this reason, a tax collector was counted among the worst of sinners and was banned from Jewish social and religious life. The tax collector is “justified” or made right, before God because they recognized that they are a sinner in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. Everyone is reliant on God alone for salvation.

Throughout scripture, we see Jesus forgiving people. All sorts of people. All the time. Almost none of them ever even ask Jesus for his forgiveness, he just forgives them right off the bat. Throughout the gospels, Jesus says to all sorts of people, “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus says this, usually before they have done or said anything. Jesus forgives everyone. All the time. How does God respond to our sins? God forgives. Completely. Automatically. One hundred percent. Jesus never waited for anyone to repent. Jesus never asked anyone to confess. Jesus forgave everyone he met, every single time. We are forgiven. And, knowing that we are so completely and effortlessly forgiven is what empowers us to freely and extravagantly forgive those who harm us. Freely we have been forgiven. We are commanded to freely forgive. This truth was the foundation for the reformation which we celebrate today.

Praying, “O God be gracious to me, a sinner. Please forgive me.” Is likely to make you less critical of others, help you not judge others, and help you not compare yourself to others. The next step is to build relationships. How do you think the Pharisee’s life would have been different if he had a nonjudgmental, caring, compassionate, loving relationship with the tax collector? In this age of misinformation and quick communication, it is easy to misunderstand others. Realizing we are all equal helps keep the conversation going, so we can better understand each other, care for each other, and love each other. A tremendous amount of time, energy, and resources is spent by individuals and groups trying to elevate themselves, trying to convince people that they are somehow better. Imagine all the wonderful things we will accomplish when we truly live the fact that we are all equal putting all that time, energy and resources into finding solutions. God is bringing that time to fruition. You and I can speed the day that it happens.

Michael Sullivan writes, “There are people who embody darkness and in their insistence on being right, they disrespect humanity, creation, and God. Everything is black and white. They exploit others from their places of power and privilege. But the conversation, it seems to Michael, begins by inviting light into darkness, peace into discord, mercy into injustice— rather than assuming we are right, insisting on a narrow way.” Michael continues. “I am seeing far more dogmatic, I-am-right-at-all-costs arguing than I am encountering discernment, wisdom, and acceptance. So, here’s an invitation during difficult times: whatever your tradition, can you bear light into the dark places of this world? Can you allow yourself to let go of the things that restrict your tradition and open yourself to the opportunities for an ever-expanding dignity among all people? Of course, you can. God already has. Seek difference. Seek multiplicity. Seek wisdom.”

O God be gracious to me, a sinner. Please forgive me. Saint Augustine said, “This is the very perfection of a person, to find out our own imperfections.” When we fully embrace that we are made perfect by God’s grace alone, we are set free from comparing and judging enabling us to love everyone, enabling us to celebrate equality. If we cling to even a trace of self-righteousness, we will be plagued with judging thoughts that damage relationships. God makes us righteousness. God will make us perfect.

Joan Chittister said, “The nice thing about being human is that you get to fail a lot. Value that; it’s priceless. It gives us such respect for everybody else. The reason clowns and slapstick comedians are so popular is that, if truth were known, we all see in them the parts of ourselves we try too hard to hide. When we take ourselves too seriously, we forget that the only thing we know for sure that is eternal is God and God’s grace. Making mistakes is part of the growth process. We must learn to be much gentler about this with other people. We must also learn to be gentler with ourselves. Otherwise what we expect of ourselves, we will expect of everybody else. And that can be tragic. For all of us.”

Being aware of your imperfections leads to your acceptance of God is perfection of you. It frees us to admit, “we don’t know” that we have no idea what it is ever like to live someone else’s life. It frees us to celebrate God’s grace that forgives and perfects everyone, that will unite everyone in harmony. To paraphrase reformer Martin Luther: A good person does good works; but good works do not a good person make. No self-justification will ever “cut it”. Humility guides us to receive God’s grace which elevates us all.

**Luke 18:9-14 MSG “Jesus told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’ “Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’” Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”**

Walt Whitman said. “Re-examine all that you have been told…dismiss that which insults your soul.” Perhaps you have been told that you need to repent to be forgiven, that you need to believe certain things, or say certain words, or do a specific act or belong to a certain group. The despised tax collector was exalted and praised by Jesus for accepting God’s grace. Jesus told stories of grace, stories of reconciliation, stories of renewed relationships, stories of love. Jesus told stories of people torn apart that God brings together. Jesus told stories of judgmental people who end up being in loving relationship with the people they once judged. Jesus told stories of banquets, feasts, celebrations where all are invited, all are found, all are brought in, all belong.

God loves you. God loves everyone. All of us are saved by God’s grace alone. Amen