



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Eleventh Sunday After Trinity - August 15, 2021

"God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

St. Luke 18:13d (NASB)

A checkout clerk at a grocery store once wrote to advice columnist Ann Landers to complain that she had seen people buy "luxury" food items, like birthday cakes and bags of shrimp, with their food stamps. She also wrote that she thought all those people on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were "lazy and wasteful". A few weeks later Landers' column was devoted entirely to people who had responded to the checkout clerk. One woman wrote:

"I didn't buy a cake, but I did buy a big bag of shrimp with food stamps. So what? My husband had been working at a plant for 15 years when it was shut down. The shrimp casserole I made was for our anniversary dinner and it lasted three days."

Another woman wrote:

"I'm the woman who bought the \$17 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the checkout woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn't know was the cake was for my little girl's birthday. It would most likely be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone in six to eight months."



Honestly now, how many of us have ever erroneously rushed to judgement about another person – all the while thinking that we've cornered the market on righteous living? In today's Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 18:9-14, our Lord Jesus speaks about just that using a parable aimed at (as verse 9a states):

"...some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else."

In other words, Jesus told a simple story to warn all His hearers then (and now) **to beware the sin of self-righteousness**. Before delving into it, however, I want to call attention to the fact that while His parable features a "Pharisee", Jesus is not limiting its application to him alone, for Jesus' own disciples were also in danger of such behaviour and were previously warned by Jesus (in St. Luke 12:2):

"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known."

Moreover, the disciples had already demonstrated similar attitudes in their treatment of others (for example, in St. Luke 9:46-48):

"An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.'"

Mark this down:

The sin of self-righteousness is something with which anyone can struggle. So, let's ask Jesus to show us if – and how – this sin has found its way into our lives. To help us in this worthy endeavour, I would like to make three observations about self-righteous people.



Observation #1: Self-Righteous people are often spiritual people.

As we read in verses 10-12 of today's Gospel Lesson:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"

Let's consider the Pharisee's example in Jesus' parable. He assumes that he is engaged in all the right activities to merit God's favour. He is praying and happens to mention the spiritual disciplines of fasting and tithing. (By the way, all three – prayer, fasting, and tithing – are worthy spiritual disciplines that can help one to be more Christ-like.) However, the sin is not found in the Pharisee's actions themselves, but in his **self-righteous attitude**. Furthermore, the danger with the sin of self-righteousness is that, like the Pharisee, **we rarely ever see it in ourselves**, as so poignantly observed by Pastor Kerry Bauman of Chain of Lakes Community Bible Church in Lake Villa, Illinois:

"I once had a talk with a Christian woman about a behavioral issue clearly addressed in the Bible. She held a different view from me on the issue, which of course is her right, but her reason for doing so bothered me. She said, 'I know it's true because I feel it in my heart.' What she was really saying was, 'If your heart was as pure as mine, you'd know it too.'"



Observation #2: Self-Righteous people are often satisfied people.

Now, let's ponder some contrasts between the Pharisee's prayer and that of the tax collector (verses 11-13 of today's Gospel Lesson):

"The Pharisee stood and began praying this in regard to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, crooked, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to raise his eyes toward heaven, but was beating his chest, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'"

First, let's examine "The Pharisee's Prayer". It starts out as if it is going to be a prayer of thanksgiving to God, but ends up being a prayer of self-satisfaction. Most likely, the Pharisee's prayer was spoken out loud and was meant to accomplish two things:

- 1. It was, in reality, a sermon to the less fortunate who were also at the temple to worship.** (In short, the Pharisee took it upon himself to offer - most graciously, no doubt - a few words of judgement, along with some instruction in righteousness.)
- 2. It was meant to impress all those who were within earshot with the level of sacrifice that he was willing to make in his commitment to achieving "true spirituality".** (I mean, just how often would the less fortunate have such a golden opportunity to get a good look at a truly pious man?)

In any case, the Pharisee's "approach" is worthy of consideration:

- ✓ **The Pharisee prayed while standing.**

Although the Pharisee is praying in the guise of corporate worship, note that he stood exactly where he could be seen **by everyone else**. Furthermore, by standing up, the Pharisee clearly intended to elevate himself above all those who (in his esteemed estimation, anyway) personified the very essence of “uncleanness” (such as robbers, evil doers, adulterers, and tax collectors.)

✓ **The Pharisee fasted twice a week.**

Now in Jesus’ day, the discipline of fasting could be undertaken for a variety of purposes, including:

- 👍 *To prepare oneself for service (as in St. Matthew 4:1-2);*
- 👍 *As a sign of repentance (as in Nehemiah 9:1);*
- 👍 *During seasons of prayer (as in Daniel 9:3); and*
- 👍 *When commissioning others for God’s service (as in Acts 14:23).*

Yet this Pharisee far exceeded the expectations of others when it came to this spiritual discipline, as Jews were required by the Law of Moses to fast only once a year (on Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement”); thus, the Pharisee fasted not because God had impressed his heart to do so, **but because it was what righteous people did.**

✓ **The Pharisee gave a tenth of everything.**

The standard (according to Moses) was to give a tenth of certain crops as they were harvested. Nonetheless, the Pharisee would never consider such a small sacrifice. He would do more than anyone could possibly expect, after all **His reputation depended on it.**

Now, let’s look at “The Tax Collector’s Prayer”. As I have discussed in previous sermons, tax collectors were people of low social status who were hired by the hated Roman authorities and often sold out their Jewish brethren for money – in addition to cheating them. In

any event, like the Pharisee, the tax collector also stood – **albeit at a distance**. In addition, he did it for a completely different reason: the tax collector in Jesus’ parable assumed no rightful place among the other worshippers – **nor did he attempt to take one** – for he did not consider himself worthy to stand with God’s people before the altar. In a word, the tax collector’s prayer revealed **complete dissatisfaction with himself**, as follows:

- 1. The tax collector was humbled, as evidenced by his unwillingness even to lift his eyes up to heaven.**

(Usually, Jewish worshippers lifted their eyes to God, as we read in Psalm 123:1:

“I lift up my eyes to you to you who sit enthroned in heaven.”

But not this time. Instead, the tax collector adopted a posture of humility, by choosing “to take the low road” just as, in Romans 12:16, St. Paul counselled his readers to do:

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”)

- 2. The tax collector was ashamed, as evidenced by the beating of his own chest.**

(In the Ancient Near East, to beat one’s breast was a sign of extreme anguish or intense anger, as per Jeremiah 31:19:

“After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.”)

- 3. The tax collector cried out in his anguish, “God, be merciful to me, THE sinner.”**

(The definite article “the” is found in the original Greek of St. Luke’s Gospel, and is rightly translated so by some recent versions of Holy Scripture – the New American Standard Bible, or NASB, for example. Hence, while the Pharisee might have thought of others as sinners, the tax collector did not even consider others’ shortcomings; rather, his only concern was that he himself was “the” sinner.)



Observation #3: Self-Righteous people are, often, surprised people.

As Jesus declares in verse 14 of today’s Gospel Lesson:

“I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went to his house justified rather than the other (the Pharisee); for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The self-righteous Pharisee asked for nothing from God and, as a result, received nothing in return – whereas the tax collector, having come to the temple in humility, asked for forgiveness and was justified by God. Subsequently, like other “sinners”, the tax collector found himself included among God’s people.

So why “sinners”?

- ☞ **Because “sinners” lived under no pretense of their own self-righteousness.**
- ☞ **More to the point, “sinners” knew that they were sick and were badly in need of healing (as described by St. Luke in chapter 5, verses 30-32 of his Gospel):**

“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to Jesus’ disciples, ‘Why do you eat and drink with

tax collectors and sinners?'

Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'"

I often wonder just how many people will be surprised when our Lord Jesus returns the second and final time, by finding themselves "on the outside looking in", simply because they never properly prepared for Christ's coming Kingdom:

- ☞ **having foolishly placed their confidence in their own righteousness, and, in the process,**
- ☞ **having neglected to humble themselves, and, therefore,**
- ☞ **having never received the righteousness of God in and through Jesus Christ,**

despite St. Paul's urgent warning in Romans 3:20-22:

"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

My guess is that there will be many surprised "disciples" who, while expecting a place in the Kingdom of God, will be left out in the cold or, rather, **in the fiery heat.**



Before that day comes, however, we can all be fully forewarned (or duly diagnosed as to whether we are currently suffering from the

sinful and fatal disease of self-righteousness) by first acknowledging whether we are currently afflicted by any (or all) of the following symptoms:

- ☞ **When we are quick to rush into the judgement of others;**
- ☞ **When we tend to minimize our sin while maximizing others’;**
- ☞ **Or when we feel that we have arrived spiritually.**

And only then may we seek to be “cured”, by humbly imploring our Lord Jesus Christ, “The Great Physician” to heal us – and soon.

Accordingly, this very day, this “Eleventh Sunday After Trinity”,

Let us beware of the **deadly sin of self-righteousness**, as it may easily lead us to a false sense of self-satisfaction (and, if left unchecked, will ultimately lead us to eternal places where we do not wish to go).

And let us always keep in mind, and heart, and soul the need to approach, in all humility, our Lord Jesus Christ – every day – and offer up to Him this simple prayer:

“God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”



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