

**Sermon Preached
By Doug King
October 24, 2004
Luke 18:9-14**

I fear that Luke has shortchanged us a bit this morning with his presentation of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. His cut and dried wrap up statement that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" takes all of the play out of the text. Parables are supposed to allow for some creative tension, some mystery to unpack. Luke's presentation is more like a morality tale than a parable.

The only thing left for me to do is muddy up what Luke has presented so clearly. Let's start off by defending this Pharisee who is taking such a beating. At first glance he does come off as rather arrogant with his prayer. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." Now some of these words are actually a version of an ancient Talmudic prayer that he was taught to pray. The purpose of the prayer was to offer gratitude to God even for the things we do right in this world. It is a prayer that acknowledges that without God's help we would be incapable of doing anything good at all. The Pharisee's judgmental attitude comparing himself to others was his own addition and does not put him in the running for the sweetest clergyman in the world award but we could probably cut him a little slack.

And what about the tax collector? Yes, his humility before God is a powerful statement that he recognizes his failures in this world but what is he going to do about it? As a tax collector in ancient Palestine he is part of the occupying Roman force extorting funds from the local population. Is it really that noble that he takes a break from his extorting to ask for mercy before he goes back to his extorting?

Neither of these guys are particular favorites for me. But this text is not really about weighing the comparative worth or lack thereof of either of these two. This is a text about maps and locations. My wife Marta would get a kick over this because she is the map reader in our family. I have little use for maps and I am rarely concerned about where I am located. She would tell you that I am geographically challenged. I would say I am too creative to be tied down by life's realities. Nevertheless let us push forward.

The temple had a specific geography to it. There is a reason the Pharisee and the tax collector are not side by side as they pray. There were specific locations for every kind of person to be present in the temple. There were locations for women, for men, for Jews, for Gentiles, for clergy, for laity. There was a well defined map of where you should stand and how you should pray to be in right relationship with God. The tradition provided a theological AAA triptik if you will. Take three steps to the left two steps forward and one step to the right and you were in good with God. Step off of the path and you were falling away from God. In the geography of the Temple the Pharisee was standing much closer to God than the tax collector could. And yet the tax collector is the one who receives the praise.

What we have here is a victory for the geographically challenged. Take that Marta! The ones who were so good at reading the map and knowing exactly where they stood with God at all times have received a rude awakening. The map is no longer providing directions to the heart of God. In this parable Jesus is telling us that there is no guaranteed guide to getting in good with the divine. Now, for those of us who thrive on ambiguity because it generally suits our personalities this is not all too shocking. But for those of us gifted with focus and a desire to have the road before us clearly delineated we can officially start to feel a little uncomfortable. Attend worship every Sunday without fail, no guarantee that you have earned anything. Volunteer many hours of your time at the soup kitchen, no guarantee that you have earned anything. Become ordained so you can put on a black robe and preach from the pulpit, no guarantee that you have earned anything.

God is not some piece of computer software in which if we enter the right formula of material we will receive the desired response. Our God is a God of surprises. There is no place on the high ground of our actions to stand and call out to God in self satisfied expectation. We cannot earn God's love by any proscribed pattern.

Without a map to get to God we are forced to realize that we cannot control God. In so many aspects of our lives we seek some form of control. We diet and exercise in the hope of controlling our health. We put money in IRA's in the hope of controlling our financial future. As humans we have a deep need to believe that we can have lives that are completely under our control. Unfortunately we all learn sooner or later that the best of our intentions provide no guarantees about how our lives will unfold.

Many people of faith have the hope of controlling their relationship with God. I believe that one of the reasons we have seen such a rise in the popularity of fundamentalism in the world's religions is a cry for control. In a world that leaves many feeling powerless in many ways it is a seductive notion that following a strict set of rules will guarantee what God will do for us. But this text tells us that God does not respond to us in some coin into the slot fashion.

We cannot demand any specific response from our God regardless of our actions. But just because we do not control God, does not mean we are left without an understanding of how God responds to us. Through this Christ who tells us we cannot force God into acting, we receive the most radical action on our behalf possible. Through Christ we are offered the grace of God, the promise of healing and forgiveness for all that has gone wrong in these lives of ours we try so hard to control. God's radical redeeming love is brought to us by no action of our own but by the actions of a God who chooses to let no boundary stand between Creator and created.

We do not need a map to get to God because God has never left our side. There is no direction we can turn to earn God's love and no direction we can turn to lose God's love. Such good news is inspiring and humbling as we seek to respond to such a gift in a

faithfulness not borne of a desire to control but a desire to demonstrate our gratitude. We find ourselves no better or worse than anyone else. We seek to do justice; love kindness; and walk humbly with our God in response to a gift of love beyond anything we could ever earn. Thanks be to God. Amen.