



## 'The Great Reversal'

Lectionary 30 – Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost  
8:30 & 10:45 am, October 23, 2016  
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Psalm 84:1-7](#); [2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#); [Luke 18:9-14](#)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We'll begin with a modern-day retelling of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. **(Note to reader—Projected on our screens is a YouTube video. You can view this video at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlpqpQyNQgs>)**

After reading Luke's account of this parable told by Jesus, and after viewing that modern-day version, all I can say is, "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee, who brags about his being so religious, so good, so obedient and faithful. In contrast, I'm not one to boast, or talk about myself too much—I know how that can look. But since we're on the subject of me, I guess I'm doing OK. Don't break too many of those commandments—at least not the big ones. I filled out my Estimate of Giving Card for the church. I bring non-perishable items for the food pantry. I'm nice to cats and dogs. Yes, God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee."

Oh, my—excuse me! Do you see how easy it is to fall right into Pharisee mode? We read Jesus' parable and as we begin to interpret it, the slippery slope of self-aggrandizement and self-justification begins.

We should have seen this coming. I've mentioned before that it's helpful to know the context in which Jesus tells a story, for it aids us in better understanding Jesus' purpose and a parable's meaning. So here's the context for today's parable: "Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." (Luke 18:9)

Well, the context may be that Jesus is speaking to some actual Pharisees. See, Pharisees gets mostly bad press in the Bible. They are part of the Jewish religious establishment. Not priests who lead worship, but people who know scripture well. Who study it regularly and thoroughly, and then attempt to live it out to the letter of the Law, sometimes to excess. And not only live out the Jewish laws of the Torah, but also make clear to everyone else that they, too, are supposed to obey the laws of the Torah. Who better to insist how others are to behave than a Pharisee who seems to obey the Lord God's laws almost effortlessly? Who more capable of judging others' faithfulness than a Pharisee who is the epitome of faithfulness? These are the folks to whom this parable is directed.

Luke's Gospel mentions Pharisees numerous times, and generally negatively. Luke writes that Pharisees criticize Jesus for the people he eats with, who happen to be outcasts like prostitutes and tax collectors. They rebuke Jesus for healing someone on the Sabbath, in the Temple, no less. They judge harshly those who come to Jesus, like the woman who dared to anoint his feet. Mostly what we read about the Pharisees is that they are self-righteous and quick to condemn.

No wonder the "prayer of repentance" by the Pharisee looks very little like either a prayer or repentance. Jesus has taught his disciples what prayer looks like, and it's not like this. Prayer is an openness to God, a God-at-the-center-of-our-lives moment. But this prayer seems to have the Pharisee at the center. And Jesus has taught his disciples what repentance is, and it is not like this. Repentance is a turning back to God, a great reversal of direction. But this Pharisee seems to be moving headlong in the direction of giving a resume of his own accomplishments.

So it's clear the Pharisee isn't to be our model of faithful living, which makes it easy once again to say, "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee!"

But the tax collector is no upstanding citizen to model our lives after either. While Pharisees at least appeared admirable in polite society, the tax collector was considered an unsavory pawn of an oppressive Roman Empire, and perhaps even in cahoots with that Empire. While collecting taxes from his neighbors designated for the Roman coffers, he was free to charge as much as he was able above and beyond those taxes, and keep the profits for himself. To be honest, if given a choice, people didn't mind seeing their friendly neighborhood Pharisee, but they were not too keen on inviting their friendly neighborhood tax collector to the block party.

Yet the tax collector's prayer was wholly different from that of the Pharisee. It WAS prayer. It WAS repentance. It was not a litany of accomplishments, but, rather, an opening of his real self to God and a simple, honest acknowledgement of his own failures. It was a great reversal of direction: From the human tendency to explain one's self or justify one's actions or offer excuses for bad behavior to admitting his radical dependence upon God.

But the parable is not the juxtaposition of a good guy and a bad guy. Or necessarily of a good "pray-er" and a bad "pray-er." Because the moment we juxtapose the two, we are tempted to align ourselves with one of them and say to ourselves about the other, "God, I thank you that I am not like him." We are tempted to believe we can become more like the one and not the other, and end up saying, "Look at me, God!" And then we fall into Pharisee mode once more. In fact, if you recall the modern-day version of the parable that we viewed on the screens, it ended with the narrator saying, "Be humble. Don't be like that guy." Which, when you get right down to it, is judgmental, "holier than thou", and acting like a Pharisee. The reality of this story is that we have **two** bad guys who just happen to be bad in different ways. We have **two** flawed and sinful human beings who come to the temple to pray. And we have **one** God who alone grants mercy, who justifies, who has the capacity to make us right.

It is this one God upon whom we depend, and not upon our personal resume. It is this one God in whom we trust, and not in our ability to contrast ourselves favorably with our neighbor. We can't manipulate God. We can't fool God. All each of us can do is reverse course, turn around, stand before God without excuses, and let God be God in our lives. As Father Richard Rohr said, "It's not addition that makes one holy but subtraction: stripping the illusions, letting go of pretense, exposing the false self, breaking open the heart..." (Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*)

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. **AMEN.**

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