

Wanting Badly

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Texts: Luke 18: 9-14

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers...”

The joke here, of course, is that the more we pray that kind of prayer, the more we show that we are just like other people. Like everyone else who wants so badly to be a good person, and to feel that they're a good person, and to be seen as a good person.

We all want, we all need to feel worthy. We work so hard. We take on so much responsibility. We choose our words so carefully. We try so hard to do the right thing... to be acceptable not only to other people, but to ourselves and to God.

And how can we possibly know whether we're good except by comparing ourselves to bad people?

Thieves. Rogues. Adulterers. Or tax collectors, God help us. The masked ICE agents of their day.

It's the closest comparison I can come up with. Tax collectors were locals in the pay of Rome. They had bid on and won the right to collect taxes on behalf of the state, and a little extra (sometimes a lot extra) for themselves. Their reputation for greed, corruption, and ruthlessness seems to have been completely deserved. No first-century Jew of any faction, sect, or walk of life wanted anything to do with tax collectors.

So of course, Jesus makes one the hero of today's parable.

Even more outrageous, he actually goes out and finds a real-life tax collector, Matthew, and calls him as one of his twelve disciples – the inner circle that would become the core of his new community, what today we call the church. What are we supposed to think about that?

Because remember, when it comes to tax collectors, we're not talking about an unfairly maligned Jewish minority here. We're talking about the first-century equivalent of ICE.

Most people like underdogs, and want to root for them. Bad guys, not so much.

When you see the news, isn't there a part of you, maybe an unconscious part, that says to yourself, "God, I thank you that I am not like that immigration agent over there?"

And at the same time, when you hear today's passage read, isn't there a part of you, again maybe an unconscious part, that's thinking, "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee over there..."

No? That's just me? Because I know I want very badly to be the good person in the story, the one who goes down to her home justified.

A funny phrase, that. To want "badly" to be "good."

That's the plight of the Pharisee in Jesus' story. It's not wrong to want to do the right thing, to follow the commandments and live a holy life. That was what the Pharisees were known for in the first century: living and preaching lives of personal piety.

The danger Jesus seems to be warning about here is what happens when our focus on goodness narrows down to our own performance – our own personal virtue. If it's starting to be all about us, and not about the goodness of God, and not about the needs of our aching world... well, it might be time for a reset.

Our imaginary Pharisee has made a long, uphill journey to Jerusalem, to stand before the holy of holies in the Temple, only to end up with a prayer that's all "I" statements. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people... I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

How did it end up being all about him? Because he's human. It's a thing we do.

Poor fictional Pharisee. The inner pressure to be good ends up turning him into the bad guy in the parable. He so "badly" wants to be "good" that ends up edging God out of his mental

picture altogether, and just talking to himself about himself.

I've been there. I've been that guy.

The fictional tax collector's prayer isn't like that. Maybe he's fallen about as far as you can fall. Maybe he's tired of being hated and ostracized. Maybe the wealth he wanted so badly that he was willing to become a Roman collaborator has left him feeling nothing but emptiness. Or maybe he just woke up one day feeling desperately lonely for God. Jesus leaves it to us to imagine.

Whatever is going on with him, the tax collector's prayer is simple, and it's a real prayer: "God be merciful to me!"

No excuses. No bargaining. Just an openhearted plea for grace.

Jesus doesn't say that the Pharisee, who appears to be living such a virtuous life, is actually a bad person deep down.

And he doesn't say that the tax collector, a known collaborator with the occupying power, is actually a pretty good guy, if you just get to know him.

He says that on this particular day, at least, they prayed different kinds of prayers. And one of those prayers drew the pray-er closer to God, while the other left the pray-er exactly where he started: staring anxiously into the mirror.

Notice what Jesus says about where the two men were standing.

"The Pharisee was standing by himself." Standing alone, and praying a lonely prayer: "I thank you that I am not like other people! I fast... I tithe..." It's a tragic prayer, really. The prayer of an isolated soul who cannot bring himself to ask God for anything. And nothing, alas, is what he receives. All he is able to receive.

Meanwhile, Jesus says, the tax collector stands "far off" – too ashamed to approach the holy of

holies, or rub elbows with other worshipers. Yet from that distance, he opens his heart and prays to God the one prayer he needs to pray, that we all need to pray at times: “God, be merciful to me.” And God hears, and forgives. That’s what “justified” means, if you wondered. It means the tax collector goes home with a clean slate. God has canceled out his sins.

We live in a time and place where people are so divided, one camp from another. Red from blue, left from right. Here we are, sharing this tiny little speck of cosmic dust of a planet in an unfathomably vast universe, sharing 99.9 percent of our human DNA, 99.9 percent...

And yet we find ourselves standing so, so far off from each other. Thank God I’m not like that person over there!

We want so badly to be pure, we want so badly to distance ourselves from what we find morally distasteful. But the hard truth is that we’re all bound up together in the same systems of injustice, we’re all morally compromised – we can’t help it.

Jesus’s most insistent message in the gospels is about the grace we ALL need to get through this life. Grace toward ourselves, and grace toward other people – recognizing that all of us are in need of repentance, all of us need God’s forgiveness – not just “that tax collector over there.”

Not just that Pharisee, that MAGA voter, that masked ICE agent... but I myself.

There’s little sign of that grace in the current social and political atmosphere in which we find ourselves. Just deepening rifts, gulfs, canyons, moving us all further and further apart, one angry Tic Toc, one scathing Facebook post, one mocking tweet at a time.

And I “get” the sense of moral repugnance many of us are feeling. I don’t want anything to do with people who think and act and vote that way either. If I’m honest, the way the past ten years have gone, I might even think of them as irredeemable. And they probably think the same about me.

But we’re both wrong. No one is irredeemable. No one is irredeemable because redemption – a fancy word for liberation – doesn’t depend on our strained efforts to be good. It’s simply God’s

gift to the world in Jesus, the one who calls flawed, guilty people like us out of the shadows and into community, to work things out, sinner to sinner.

Maybe we should stop wanting so badly to be good, and just focus on being with other people, heart to heart, soul to soul.

Which is hard when we're busy trying to fix ourselves, trying to hold onto control, working away on the whole self-improvement project. We don't always remember to stop and make room for God to shower us with mercy. Besides, it's scary, letting go and letting God in.

And so we check ourselves in the mirror, we look around to see how others are doing in the good person game, we compare and we judge... and all the while – speaking personally – the voices of all the people who have ever found fault with us are replaying in our heads. We feel the weight of their disapproval and disappointment.

Jesus has come to lift all that off our shoulders. To bridge the seemingly impossibly far-off distance between God and humankind, and between nation and nation, race and race, left and right, red and blue – calling us from far away, out of isolation into community with other flawed humans. Calling us to be honest with each other, and kind, as God is kind.

Don't we all long, deep down, for someone to turn and look at us, see us, see past our glaring faults, and call us to their heart? The church, at its best, is a community of people who are trying to do this for each other, who love each other even though, and in so doing, help to love each other into greater wholeness, as this community has loved me into greater wholeness, bit by bit by bit, for almost 40 years.

Faith community isn't a place where we try to be good people. It's where we learn (slowly, halting, with a lot of mistakes – oh, Lord, so many mistakes – to be good to each other, and to ourselves, and to the world: drawn ever closer into the one goodness, the one kindness, the one mutuality, the one outpouring of generous love, that is God.

I think maybe that's what Jesus means when he says in his word for us today that "all who

humble themselves will be exalted.” When we set our egos aside, kindly and compassionately, then we begin to find the freedom to notice others: who they are, what they are going through, what they care about.

And yes, their glaring faults and foibles; but maybe now we’re starting to notice these things through a different lens: not the lens of judgment and disappointment (those weapons I’m just as likely to turn on myself as on others), but more and more through the lens of compassion.

So that, dearly beloved, when we go back out into the world, we are different. And even though each of us is only one person, when we change, the world is changed, because we’re part of the world.

May it be so, by God’s grace. And to God be all glory, thanks, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

