

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 14: 20-22
SECOND LESSON: Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2022

“Be Real with God”
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There’s a name on social media for what the Pharisee did in Jesus’ parable. It’s called the “humble brag.” People post things like, “How can I ever get over being rejected by MIT and Stanford and having to settle for Yale?” And there are a lot of humble brags trying to make the person look spiritually superior. One woman posted, “I’m probably the most generous and caring person there is and I’ve never seen it in return, but I still don’t change.” And another wrote, “I’ve been doing this thing lately where I tip people obscenely and give money to all the homeless people I see. I only had 50s in my wallet today so that’s what the homeless man got. He started bawling and called me an angel.” And finally, there is the person who tweeted, “I’m truly humbled you follow my tweets. I pray they enrich your life and strengthen your ministry. God bless all 200,000 of you!”

The Pharisee was praying aloud in the Temple. It wasn’t a tweet. It was very much live and in-person. While there were set times for prayer the Temple was also open for people to pray at any time, but praying aloud was quite common. We are told that Jesus told this parable because some people in his audience were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. So Jesus took what they were *thinking* but did not say, and created a character who said it for them. The “prayer” of this imaginary Pharisee is full of “I statements.” **I** thank you, that **I** am not, **I** fast and **I** give a tenth of all **I** get. As prayers go, it’s pretty centered on self, not God. *But it’s what they were thinking.*

Pharisees did not have the universally bad reputation then that we have given them as a result of Jesus’ many critiques. Many genuinely tried to uphold the Torah and live their faith in a world where the pressure to compromise was constant. This particular Pharisee stood apart from everyone else, a concrete expression of the fact that Pharisees separated themselves from both Roman and Samaritan society. He spent no time praising God, confessing failures or even asking for help. It’s all thanksgiving—but thanksgiving with a twist. And if we are honest with ourselves, what this Pharisee had achieved is impressive. He fasts twice a week. Reform Judaism today only requires fasting once a year on the Day of Atonement. Stricter Jews call for six fast days a year. Today we might consider that severe, although there are people who incorporate fasting into their regular spiritual lives. Fasting twice a week was not uncommon in the early church. This man fasted twice a week, and he was very proud of

himself for doing so. The Pharisee also tithed absolutely everything, not just the production of his fields stipulated by Deuteronomy. And he compared himself to all the others he considered inferior, thanking God “that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.” *You know, the guy over there who would have been within earshot.*

Pharisees in this society were the good guys and tax collectors were the bad guys. Tax collectors were collaborators with Rome who robbed other Jews. But this particular tax collector knew how badly he had messed up and didn't try to sugar coat it. He was brutally and humbly honest. He couldn't even bring himself to lift his eyes to God. The Pharisee would have stood and lifted his hands to God. This man was practically folded in on himself. He beat his breast, a sign of deep distress. He said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And Jesus concluded his parable by saying, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Society does not operate by God's principles. Society teaches us to be dishonest. Being dishonest is a survival skill. We have to pretend to be perfect. We have to pretend to have it all together. If you listen to any of the deluge of political ads we are suffering through right now you will find one trait in common. The candidate in question is absolutely perfect, and his or her opponent is the incarnation of evil who will bring total destruction upon the world if elected. There's no grey area. There's no humility in politics at all. It's the forces of evil and darkness against the forces of light, and who each side is depends upon the perspective of the political party. How dare anyone take a nuanced view of a candidate?! How dare anyone point out strengths and weaknesses?!

God is not impressed with our politicians or with our own efforts to project a face to the world that is not real. But we are so conditioned to think that we cannot admit to being less than perfect that the stress can become unbearable. Politicians might suffer from this pressure to an extreme degree, but we all feel it. In our world if we admit to being wrong, if we admit to having failed in any way, there is a very real danger that “the jackals' will come out. I know I'm showing my age but I will never forget how the press mocked Jimmy Carter when he admitted that of course, there were times he may have “committed adultery in his heart.” On the front page of the paper was a photograph of Carter making a sideways glance at a woman and alongside that the quote in huge print. The photo and the text were not connected in any way, but the attack was brutal. Humility equals weakness, and weakness is to be destroyed. It's a primitive and ugly part of human nature. But God has always called us to rise above our lowest base instincts, to transcend them and become the creatures we were meant to be—made in the image of God. We may have a primitive side focused on conquest and survival but we also have a higher moral nature.

There are people who really believe that they are better than everyone else. They do exist. But Jesus says, “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” There is an

ultimate price to pay for hubris. An oversized ego cannot stand before God. Before God lies are no longer possible. Everything is stripped away and truth is exposed. And this, for some people, is hell because they have never faced the truth before. The time to be real with God, is now. But most of us do not really believe we are better than everyone else, we are just trapped in a relentless cycle of social survival in a hostile world. And there is another very potent inner reason we cannot let go of the face we project to the world, shame. We believe that God and everyone else, will reject us if they see the truth.

Most of us counteract shame with activity. Some even become compulsive over-achievers. And the thing is, the shame we feel might not even belong to us. We can feel shame because our family of origin struggled financially, because our parents divorced, because we are not as gifted as a sibling. We can feel shame because we have been blamed for things that are not our fault. And of course, abusers always use shame. It's the most powerful tool they have. But we can also feel shame for our own actions or lack of action when we should have done something but failed to do so. There are legitimate reasons for shame, and events of the past can haunt us. But shame **does not have to destroy us**. We don't have to remain captive to every mistake we have ever made. Shame can be washed away when we are totally honest with God. God can sort out what belongs to us and what doesn't. And God can cleanse and forgive. What others sometimes will not let us forget, God will refuse to remember.

The irony is we don't have to be perfect. We can be a complete mess, like this tax collector was. All we have to be is honest. God respects honesty. God can work with honesty. God can't do anything to help if I am still trying to present myself in the best possible light and running as fast as I can from all my failures and faults. God can't fix the broken pieces unless I give God the broken pieces. God is NOTHING like society. God will not attack us for admitting our imperfections; God will embrace us. God doesn't want to hear how good we are and how noble we are. God just wants to hear **how we are**. Amen

Jeremiah 14: 20-22

²⁰ We acknowledge our wickedness, Lord,
and the guilt of our ancestors;
we have indeed sinned against you.

²¹ For the sake of your name do not despise us;
do not dishonor your glorious throne.

Remember your covenant with us
and do not break it.

²² Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain?
Do the skies themselves send down showers?

No, it is you, Lord our God.

Therefore our hope is in you,
for you are the one who does all this.

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”