

# “God, I Thank You”

*Series: The Parables of Jesus*

Scripture: Luke 18:9-18

Rev. Pen Peery



First Presbyterian  
Church of Charlotte

We are in a sermon series on the parables – those stories that Jesus tells that are intended to...unsettle our expectations, challenge our assumptions, dislocate what we consider to be our “right thinking”...all so that we can get out of our own way and better see what the Kingdom of God will be like.

Today we are reading a parable from the gospel of Luke. Before we hear it, let us go to God in prayer. Let us pray:

If we’re honest – a lot of times when we hear your word in Scripture, we listen to it so that we can determine how we are stacking up and comparing to those around us. Please, Lord...help us lay that need aside. Instead, by your Holy Spirit, open our ears, hearts, and minds so that your word can shape us...rather than help us justify ourselves and judge others. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.

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I am reading from Luke 18:9-18. Listen with me for the word of God...

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “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.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

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After 22 years of standing in pulpits, I have preached on this parable a few times.

And – years ago – it felt fresh and relevant to hear this parable as a kind rebuke against the mindset that humans have evidently always had to define themselves over and against one another.

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people...”

“God, I thank you that I am not like those thieves...those tax-collectors”

“God, I thank you that I am not like my obnoxious brother-in-law”

“God, I thank you that I am not like my holier-than-thou sister”

“God, I thank you that I am not like those woke, left-wing, namby pambys”

“God, I thank you that I am not like those MAGA-loving fanatics”

“God, I thank you that I am not like those rudderless, new-age, humanists”

“God, I thank you that I am not like those black-and-white, overly-pious, fundamentalists”

That all sounds a little too familiar, doesn’t it?

It doesn’t feel fresh to me.

I’m afraid that we might just be used to things feeling polarized.

Used to the fragmentation that is, in part, the result of ultra-partisan legislative agendas, think-tanks, and marketing strategies.

Used to the idea that navigating the places of difference in our world – difference in ideas, difference in politics, difference in beliefs, difference in outlook – that navigating those areas of difference is

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really just about leveraging power so that our side “wins” and the other side “loses” – rather than even considering old-fashioned ideas like compromise and accommodation.

I notice that one difference in the way this passage feels – today, verses other years when I have preached it – is that...other years, the behavior of the self-righteous Pharisee who “trusted in himself and regarded others with contempt” seemed almost comical...maybe like Jesus was exaggerating a type of behavior in order to make a larger point.

Today, I think witnessing someone trusting in themselves and regarding others with contempt feels almost normative.

By now you know that we choose the Scripture passage and theme for worship months before we preach it. So, yes, it is just by holy coincidence that we hear this parable today...after a week, let's see...from least dangerous to most...a week of military parades and constitutionally-protected counter-protests, or the politically-motivated assassination of a Minnesota state legislator, or acts of war between Israel and Iran that threaten to escalate into a larger regional conflict (or worse).

Contempt is pervasive, don't you think? In small-scale ways, and writ large.

I know it's nuanced. I know there are good reasons to be upset...to feel angry...to feel helpless. It's just that – particularly this week – surrounded by the storm clouds of bitter division and conflict and violence on our shores and beyond...this week it feels like a world gone mad with contempt for one another.

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One of the things I love about the parables that Jesus tells is that the way he talks about something **HUGE** – like the Kingdom of God – is by telling a story about something **small** – like yeast in a loaf of bread, or seed scattered by a sower, or – in today’s parable – the briefest look at two very different people who were both praying at the temple.

Yes – the world and the problems of the world can feel big and scary and overwhelming...but instead of getting lost in that, Jesus invites us to pay particular attention to what we can choose to do – and to examine how we can choose to see others in relation to ourselves.

The parable talks about a Pharisee and a tax-collector. What doesn’t get said – but is true – is that when it comes to virtue, and character, and living according to God’s word, and being faithful – there can be no question about who does a better job of that. Pharisees often get a bad rap – but, really, they are just people of faith trying to follow the rules and be responsible. Tax-collectors in Jesus’s day made their living by ripping off the poor, and skimming off the top, and privileging the powerful over the weak.

In other words, the Pharisee had good reason to feel affirmed in his faithfulness...and the tax-collector had good reason to feel ashamed of his sinfulness. And, if you noticed, Jesus doesn’t say anything to the contrary. This isn’t a parable about being right or wrong – it’s a parable about how we see

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ourselves and each other.

In the midst of all the chaos swirling around us – where we fight despair and feeling overpowered and overmatched – where we can feel paralyzed by how much there is to do, and change – where we can feel torn as we navigate even the relationships closest to us...and even in communities such as this one – I don’t want us to miss that what the Scripture calls our attention to this morning is to something small...manageable...in our control: to how we see ourselves and each other.

The late author and pastor, Rachel Held Evans said in a sermon on this passage:

“in general, we’d rather look down (like the Pharisee), than stoop down. 1 ”

We’d rather relish in the difference between our righteousness and someone else’s shame, or our success and someone else’s mediocrity.

But that is not the way to what Jesus called eternal life – not the way of the Kingdom of God.

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When Jesus looked on those who trusted in themselves – as well as those who had no sense of themselves to trust – he saw need...and brokenness...and sin...and beauty.

He saw a people – not distinguished by their successes, or set apart on account of their striving...people – not irrevocably marked by their sin and

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I heard Rachel Held Evan’s sermon on this parable by way of First Presbyterian Church of Shreveport, Louisiana

website. I believe this was a sermon from 2016 or 2017. Rachel Held Evans died earlier this year.

shame – but he saw people who were united in their utter dependence on the grace that he came to offer.

That offer, that grace, of course, came when Jesus chose to stoop down.

To enter in the messiness of our world – so that he could save it.

So that he could save us.

Sometimes as those who receive this grace – we forget that. We get swept up by the world’s relentless pursuit of determining who is righteous – often putting our trust in charismatic leaders and movements and parties without even realizing how far we drift from God’s path. We get caught in the trap of wading into the waters of difference only to get angry when we can’t convince or shame people to see it like we do.

Sometimes as Christ’s church – we forget that. We care more about what distinguishes us from this one or that one. Whose truth is more pure. Whose actions are more impactful. Whose interpretation is more right.

It leads us to look down...with contempt...on the other...and it can be dangerous...because self-righteousness can justify a lot – even to the point of leading us to believe that those we look down upon aren’t even people.

Jesus invites us to see things a different way.

To see ourselves – not as the product of our own hard work and good decisions and faithful choices (even if all those things are true)...or as the inadequate,

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broken, weak, and disappointing version of who we wish we could have been (even if we have reason to feel that way) – but to see ourselves as people who God made and cared enough to love.

And to see each other in the exact same way.

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Maybe it seems naïve to think that this could ever happen – for people to see themselves and each other in this way.

The world is so broken. We’re so divided. Things feel so stuck.

But before you throw up your hands, I want to tell you that it happens three times a week right here at 200 West Trade Street.

Every Tuesday and Friday at our church around noon a group of people meet together in a room for about an hour. There’s always a coffee pot. They start by introducing themselves to one another, and then they talk about life, share their struggles and their joys, hold each other accountable, and practice the twelve steps.

The first step is for them to acknowledge that the ways that they are powerless.

The second is to acknowledge that they are dependent on God to restore them and guide them.

This group of people come from different zip codes and different tax brackets.

They don’t show up in the room to impress one another, or to compare themselves over and against one another. They show up because they share a common need and being together helps them remember that.

The other time it happens is on Sunday mornings.

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We gather here – some of us prepared and settled...others of us coming in wheels hot and feeling like a total mess. We gather together. We acknowledge the ways we all fall short and are powerless to change the world or ourselves without God's help. Together we claim the promise of grace.

I know, I know...we do it every week. Maybe it feels old hat by now.

And – I know, I know...sometimes we walk out of these doors and we immediately forget. We pick back up with the pattern of seeing ourselves as righteous and looking down on others with contempt.

But we don't have to.

Because – at the very least – we have gotten a glimpse of a better way.

Look around you.

Don't compare. Don't judge. Don't feel inadequate.

Look around you.

Don't discount difference. Don't be afraid to share what you think or to express your thoughts, concerns, or convictions.

Look around you.

Each of us is in need of the same thing. Each of us has received the same thing.

Each of us are seen through the eyes of God who stooped down to save us.

Look around you.

You are not better than anyone else. You are not less deserving of grace than anyone else either.

Look around you.

We are connected – one to another. We belong – one to another.

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And now imagine there are no walls...and keep looking.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.