

The parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

A few thoughts:

The gospel writer has sandwiched this parable in between another parable and various cameos of human behaviour. Luke commences the chapter recounting how Jesus told a story describing a grumpy and impatient judge with a lot on his mind, making the time and effort to assist a persistent poor widow, just so he could have a bit of peace. Then Jesus makes the point – how much more will God, who is the epitome of patience and forbearance endure and respond to the daily prayers of those who call unto him? Yet even despite this, many will lose heart, and give up and just go away – through unbelief.

Later in the chapter Luke records how the disciples chased away small children that were brought to Jesus. But Jesus had time for them all, and he rebuked his disciples – (were they not acting in a grumpy and impatient way?) They had decided in their mind already, who they thought was suitable to be worthy of the attention of Jesus, - why waste time on these youngsters who knew nothing, - there were far more important people out there who required the Lord's time.

Then in this same chapter is the young man also who had a high opinion of himself, and craved the need to be recognised – Good Master what must I DO to inherit eternal life... completely missing the point, that it is not what we do that enables us to be possibly considered worthy for eternal life – it is what God does for us that deserves all the attention. When Jesus pinpointed the very thing which was his stumbling-block, the young man was very troubled. Would his riches prevent him from becoming poor in spirit? It seemed it was very much a struggle for him.

Then in this same chapter – even Peter thought what he, and his fellow disciples were doing made them worthy – Lord we have left all

and followed thee... Then also in this chapter Luke records the poor blind beggar crying out “Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me” The disciples were blind to his stunning perception, and obvious faith, again they rebuked the beggar, (another one ‘wasting the time of the Master, who had more important people to see’) who instead shouted even louder.

There is a theme running through these episodes and events. Put alongside one another by the gospel writer, they present human nature in its prejudice, pride, assumptions and judgemental behaviour. What is obviously a very scarce commodity is humility.

Whether a persistent poor widow, young children, a blind beggar – society deems these classes as being in some way less worthy of attention. They do not fit the image of the required expectations of usefulness or do not have the same kind of appeal. Instead the rich young man commanded the attention.

This attitude has travelled down through the ages. Even to this day, prejudice and certain images and expectations can flood the mind, estimations we can make of people, based on our own very limited experiences – at the maximum just 70 odd years worth, yet somehow we consider ourselves wise enough to decide who is worth speaking to about the Bible. Oh this one doesn’t seem to fit – too technical, or that one – no got funny ideas. Or that one over there, we tried talking to them 25 years ago, and they didn’t react how we expected them to, don’t bother with them. But every day is a new day, and as we hopefully change for the better by reading the word, can it not be possible for others to change as well? Who are mere humans anyway to judge others. As the persistent widow proved, someone at first overlooked was given the help required, the little children, scorned by others, had an experience which no doubt, they would remember for the rest of their lives, the blind beggar, dismissed as an irritant, distracting the Lord from his journey had the brightest treasure in his heart the others could not see.

So with this parable of Jesus. The Pharisee was also wildly inaccurate with his skill of estimating particularly when it came to himself.

The Lord used excessive language, and exaggeration to make the contrast, but really the attitude has already been highlighted by the associated teachings Luke assembled under Divine inspiration in this chapter.

The Pharisee – the celebrated scion of Jerusalem, as he swished his way in his long robes into the temple courts, noting the admiring glances from the labouring classes, how pious, and holy, clasping his ringed fingers together, confident and comfortable in his special elevated relationship with God, that those down there, could not possibly appreciate (or so he thought) bowing his head in a practised and affectatious manner so that those around could admire his tefillin, the small, decorated black leather box that contain Torah verses he had strapped to his head.

The Jews, all knew the type. Jesus did not have to labour the point. When he described the two men, everyone would have known that it was the Pharisee the Jesus was referring to as those who thought they were righteous and despised others.

Certainly not the publican or tax collector as we are more familiar with. The tax collectors were a despised bunch, despised by the Pharisees as of course they despised everyone, but the tax collectors were at the bottom of the pile, way below even the blind beggars, children and widows. Regarded by many as traitors and puppets of the Roman regime, they did the Romans dirty work for them, ensuring each business, each merchant, every farmer paid the excessive taxes, which were bleeding the nation dry. Taxation has always been a contentious issue, but to the Jews it was akin to blasphemy to work for the Romans, and force their countrymen to pay up.

From the tax collectors view point, it was a job that no one wanted, but the job of last resort. When all else had failed, and life had

delivered blow after blow, when the only way to earn money was to work for the enemy. Often these men had been corrupted because of the aristocratic classes anyway.

Still every Jew knew the law, tax collector right up the Pharisee.

So it would not have been difficult for Jesus to tap into the everyday experience of the crowd who would often have observed all classes of people going up to the temple to pray. And even seeing opposite ends of society praying in proximity...

But who was praying to the Just Judge in faith and persistence, and who would be heard?

Like the young man later described in the chapter, this Pharisee was very quick to congratulate himself to God, listing his good and noble deeds. So intent was the Pharisee ensuring God jolly well knew what he had been doing for Him, he didn't actually address God, as Jesus notably said: *he prayed thus with himself*. As well as rattling off all his amazing accomplishments – oooh – fasting (that was difficult!) and paying tithes (not taxes to the Romans though – oh no...) the Pharisee thought it very important to point out to God, - just in case God didn't realise, that he the Pharisee was very much a better person than the rabble – *other men* who were *unjust and extortioners* (even though the Pharisee was being unjust in making such a comparison and were extorting funds from the poor by making commandments of men, - additional laws that the poor had to negotiate on pain of temple fines!) *adulterers* (even though some of the Pharisees seemed to know exactly where to find harlots *in the very act*)... Did this Pharisee have a conscience ?

Reading this – preserved for our learning, 2000 years later, nothing has changed so we can immediately detect the unpleasant smell of this rank hypocrisy, as we can see it in human nature. Jesus had a marvellous way of caricaturing human nature in these cartoon like parables at times. We know it is accurate, as the same unpleasantness is in us all. Judgemental. Lazy thinking. Assume we

are the ones. Saved. And so everything sets into a groove, and human nature becomes complacent.

Jesus described the tax collector miserable in his affliction and tormented conscience. He had one thought. He knew his place – not so much before men – but before God. Familiar with feeling wretched, he would associate with all those who at times were *wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*: (Revelation 3:17) (perhaps as a result of him collecting taxes from them) He would have loathed himself, his situation, but in his hope he had humility. His accurate estimation of himself endeared him to the Great Judge.

God be merciful to me a sinner. There is no other verdict but condemnation for Pharisee and tax collector and everyone in between. All sin and fall short of the glory of God.

In this admission, the tax collector was justified – made right, prayer heard, mercy given - forgiven. True it was but a parable, but an excellent portrayal of true life. The Pharisee, who prayed with himself could not therefore possibly be heard.

So the parable concludes: *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted. Likewise Jesus said , Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.*

Brother Terry