

## **The Perils of Being a Fine Upstanding Christian**

Joel 2:23-32 Luke 18:9-14

**Scott B. Martin October 27, 2007**

Let me tell you a dirty little secret. You have to promise not to tell anyone who rarely darkens a church door. They might use it as an excuse NOT to come to church. This is a secret they don't teach in any seminary course on evangelism and with good reason. If you tell another minister I said this, I may have to deny ever having said it. Are you ready? Here it is. **GOING TO CHURCH CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE!**

Let me hasten to add that NOT going to church can be hazardous to your spiritual life as well. This can be a case of damned if you do and damned if you don't! We'll leave the hazards of not going to church for another day. Today, let's take a look at one of the hazards of going to church and being a fine upstanding Christian. It is quite possible to get almost everything right and still get some very basic things wrong and thus negating grace and peace that comes from God and which we so deeply desire.

The Pharisee in today's gospel passage is a good example of what I am talking about. Let's take a look at him. The first thing we need to do is throw out all the old Sunday school caricatures we learned about Pharisees. They are not the quintessential bad guys they are often made out to be. In fact if anything they were the quintessential GOOD GUYS of their day. They were exactly the kind of people churches would give their "eye teeth" to have as members today!

The Pharisees, like the one Jesus is talking about, not only attended the high holy days they attended the weekly services and Bible studies every

chance they got. They went above and beyond the call of duty when it came to financial giving. They gave every penny that was required and then some. They not only kept all the religious laws on the Sabbath but all through the week they lived their daily lives by the Ten Commandments. They most certainly were not just a Sabbath believer! It is not idle boasting when the Pharisee says, **“I fast twice a week and give one-tenth of everything I get.”** (vs. 12) As Richard W. Swanson points out, **“The Pharisees preserved faith in God even under the crushing force of Roman military domination, and they preserved it by maintaining clarity about the way the goodness of God ought to shape all of faithful life.”** (*Provoking the Gospel of Luke, p. 218*) This was no small achievement and they deserve credit for it. We would be doing well to do as much in similar circumstances. It is precisely this dogged persistence in the faith that has allowed the Jewish people to survive centuries of oppression and cultural Diaspora, even the holocaust.

If we were to update this character today he would be a fine member in good standing of a local church. He would be an active member of the men’s group, a member of the deacons or church board, maybe even serve on the evangelism committee. When the annual stewardship campaign rolled around he might well be invited to give his testimony on the joys of tithing. He not only knew the Ten Commandments but kept them. He would be the kind of member that people would say, “You can always count him. If something needs to be done he’ll do it. He’s the first to volunteer and the last to leave.” The minister would sigh wistfully when thinking of him and say, “Oh if we only had a few more members like him this church could really do the Lord’s work!”

So what's the problem? Basically he has fallen into the trap many politicians fall into of believing their own press releases. "Gee, everybody thinks so highly of me. I must be a pretty good guy! I really have my act together. I really deserve this job. I'm certainly better qualified than some of the other bums I see in office!"

The Pharisee is in the temple praying, as he often was. This was standard practice for him. He's been there many times before and he's been brought up right. He knows what to do in there. He knows that standing before the Lord Almighty one should be moved to prayers of thanksgiving. It is about this time that he notices the Roman collaborator and tax collector standing off to one side praying. He starts thinking to himself: "What's he doing here? He never comes here. He doesn't belong here!" It's then that his prayer of thanksgiving to God begins to warp. He loses his spiritual focus. So it is he begins to pray, **"God, I thank you that I am not like other people who steal, cheat, or take part in adultery, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I give one-tenth of everything I get! Amen!"** (vs. 11b-12)

Notice that his focus has totally gone off God. God has become at best a secondary character in this prayer, a kind of vague entity that the Pharisee is addressing and expecting this entity to agree with him. In this short two sentence prayer the word "I" shows up FIVE times and the word God shows up only once! That is a rather telling discrepancy.

Furthermore, there is a sense of entitlement here. The Pharisee seems to expect God to pay attention to his prayer because he is such a good "man of God." Well, he is a good man of God, but that does not in any way "entitle" him to be heard by God. His godliness does not earn him brownie points to be cashed in when he prays. Godliness does not place God in our debt,

rather it we who are eternally in God's debt. God is the Creator and we are the creatures. God is the one in who we live and move and have our being. To see it otherwise is to create God in our likeness. For Godliness to retain its "godly" character it must be rooted in true appreciation of God as our Lord and Savior, before whom we are not worthy to stand, but who graciously and mercifully reaches out to us in love.

It is precisely on this point that the tax collector hangs all his hopes. He can not pretend to be a good upstanding citizen. He is not a "member in good standing" of the People of God, anything but, but on this one essential point he is right on.

Sometimes those who are outright sinners have a leg up on all us good church going people. They know they are sinners and they know they are dependent on God's grace. They can not pretend otherwise.

We can come to church, do all of the right things, most of the time, and to all outward appearances be members in good standing of the people of God. It is all too easy to start believing our own press clippings and start to believe that we merit God's attention and grace.

So it is that the tax collector can not even bring himself to look up to heaven. Just going to the temple, to stand in God's presence there was almost more than he could handle. He is so emotionally distraught by his condition that he beats himself upon his chest, as a sign of mourning, and prays, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** (vs. 13b)

It is a very simple, short prayer. There is not an "I" to be found in it. God is front and center. There is not talk of the tax collector's actions, good or bad, just a declaration of sin and a plea for mercy. There is no fancy theological talk, no allusions to scripture, no empty promises made. We can

all learn a lot from this prayer and that is Jesus' intent in telling this story. It is a situation we can all relate to, from one side of the fence or the other.

Jesus concludes the story with this statement, **“I tell you, when this man went home, he was right with God, but the Pharisee was not.”** (vs. 14) The intended warning is clear. It is quite possible to be a member in good standing of the People of God, by all outward appearances and still not be right with God. The converse is also true. It is quite possible to be a world class sinner and approach God humbly, asking for forgiveness, throwing oneself on the mercy of God and be made right with God.

We are not told how long the tax collector is “right with God.” There is no indication that he changed his ways, although one would hope that he did. We are not told that he gave up being a tax collector, as Zacheus did. We are not told that he paid back what he had stolen or coerced and that he gave away his money to the poor, as Zacheus and others did. He may not have changed his life much at all, but even if he did not, in the time immediately after the prayer, until he sinned again, he was “right with God” and that is the message of this story by Jesus. Meanwhile one can only assume the Pharisee went on being a “member in God standing of the People of God and went right on not being “right with God.”

The truth of the matter is that both of these men could have learned from each other and that is one of the most important reasons for being in a community of faith. The Pharisee could have learned from the tax collector about being humble before God and not looking down on other people. The tax collector could have learned from the Pharisee some spiritual disciplines, like prayer, fasting, worship, and living by the Ten Commandments; that might help him continue to be open to God's grace and mercy. They both had things to offer to the other.

While down in New Orleans last week our mission group visited St. Anna's Episcopal Church on a Wednesday night. This is one of the oldest Protestant churches in New Orleans and it is not too far from Bourbon Street, with its assorted street people and what one might charitably describe as "eccentric" characters.

Every Wednesday night St Anna's has a 6 p.m. communion service and after the service they have a beans and rice dinner and local jazz musicians play. They also have a health clinic going on during the dinner and jazz. People can come and get their blood pressure checked, get an HIV test, have a message or an acupuncture treatment, all for free.

The service seemed to be sparsely attended at first, but the closer we got to communion the more people slipped in the back pews. It was very high church, with lots of liturgy and the music was played on a jazz saxophone. We sat halfway down the sanctuary and could see many of the people in back of us, especially those that arrived late and slipped in.

We got through the corporate confession of sin. "We have all sinned in word and deed." The sermon was on the grace of God and how none of us, no matter how many good deeds we do, are entitled to God's grace. Grace is given to us by a loving God, because that is God's very nature. We do not earn it or merit it.

Then it was time for communion and people began to file up to the altar rail for communion. It was like seeing the kingdom of God in action. There at the rail was the man who looked like a retired doctor or lawyer, who had sat in the second pew from the front and looked like he "belonged there." Next to him was a black man with bulging muscles in his arms and braids in his hair. On the other side was a young white girl with tattoos all over her. Next to her was one of the visitors from out of town, who were in town on a

church mission trip like us. Next to her was the black man who was the usher and appeared to be developmentally disabled and walked in bar feet with a limp. Next to him was one of the jazz musicians. Next to him was one of the teenagers who looked like they were living on the street. Next to him was another woman who was dressed in “Goth” regalia, all black and wearing black mascara, looking all the world to this middle class pastor like something from a Halloween party or a Kiss concert! There they were lined up at the altar rail, holding