

At Least I'm Not Like Them

Hespeler, October 26, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Joel 2:23-32, Psalm 65, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, [Luke 18:9-14](#)

Jesus' Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector was first spoken two thousand years ago and a world away from here. But it has never felt so current – never felt like such a cutting commentary on our modern society as it does today.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

Now I know that we don't have literal Pharisees today. Nor do we have the kind of tax collectors that they had back then. Our tax collectors work for a government that, at least in theory, is supposed to be working for us and spending the money that they collect for our good. Theirs worked for a hostile occupying government that was actively plundering them.

We Recognize the Dynamics

So, we may not have those specific characters, but I think we can immediately recognize the dynamics at work in the scene. They are in the temple – the most central institution in society. It was the place where people competed with one another for honour, attention and likes. You went to the temple to be seen and to display your virtue publicly.

This is an activity that we recognize today when people post memes and criticisms on the internet or when they engage in political discussion or activity. We are still very much in a society where we compete with one another to get attention and likes. And I think that we can also recognize the way that at least one of them attempts to do that.

Where He Starts

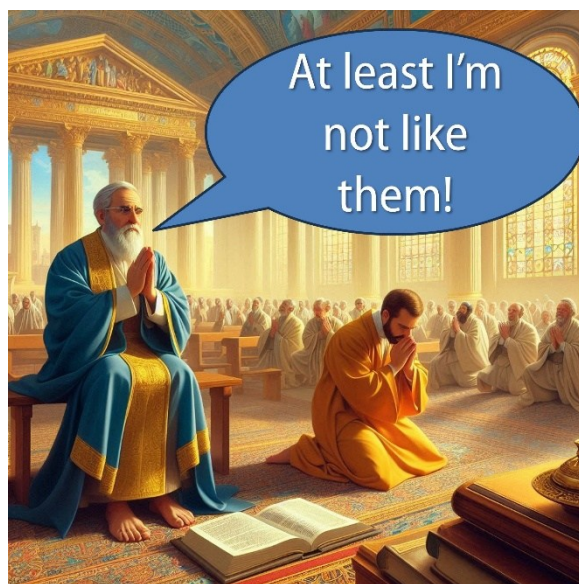
When the Pharisee comes to stand before God and all the people to make his argument for why he is a good person, how does he begin? Does he start out by carrying out acts of goodwill? Does he make rational arguments for what is right or good? No, he does not.

He starts out by listing all of the people he thinks are so bad that they make him look good by comparison. **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”** And that sounds awfully familiar to me.

We may not say it in exactly those terms today. We may not couch it as a prayer of thanksgiving to God. But, apart from that, it reminds me of so much of our public discourse.

Signalling That You Are Better

These days, it is all about signalling how we are somehow better than others for whatever reason. Somebody puts out a tweet to the world that may have different wording, but when you examine it, all it really communicates is, “God, I am so thankful that I am not like that woke mob who are destroying America.”



Meanwhile, somebody else over here is signalling, “God, I thank you that I am not like those QAnon conspiracy theorists.”

Those are the messages that seem to proliferate all of our communication these days. “I’m thankful I’m not MAGA.” “I’m thankful that I’m not liberal.” “I’m thankful I’m not an anti-vaxxer.” “I’m thankful I’m not woke.”

Content-Free Discourse

And, just like in the prayer of the Pharisee, there is no content behind that message. There are, of course, many meaningful debates that we could have over various political, economic and fairness issues. But we don’t seem to be having those debates these days. Instead we resort to name-calling. We resort to tactics like trolling and owning others because their position is different from ours.

It’s not entirely our fault. This kind of discourse has not arisen from nowhere. Part of the reason behind it is that so much of our communication has become dominated by social media. The companies that own social media have decided that engagement is more important than meaningful discussion. And they have learned that people become more engaged when they are more enraged.

Algorithmically Driven

That is why they have created algorithms that promote certain kinds of communication. If you make a cogent argument full of logic and reason about how society might operate better, that’s not going to enrage very many people. That doesn’t get promoted.

But when people post things that tear others down because of their identity or their position, that’s going to upset everybody on every side of the issues. Those who agree will take a savage glee in their enemies being put down. Those who disagree will post back in rage. That is why that message will get promoted to the moon.

So, it isn’t that people aren’t trying to have reasonable discussions. They are. The problem is that those reasonable discussions are being drowned out by all the hostile noise on social media.

But, whether it is all our fault or not, we seem to have readily taken to this new way of engaging. We, like the Pharisee in the temple, take great comfort not in our virtue, not in our accomplishments or the people we have helped, but in being at least marginally better than *those* people, whoever *those* people may be.

A Canadian Thing

And, if you will allow me to say it, perhaps Canadians are particularly good at it in at least one way. Have you noticed how, whenever you bring up any negative aspects of our country – our history of racism, for example, or our long-term treatment of the indigenous people, you are bound to get a particular response? People will say sure, but we are not as bad as the Americans.

Or what if you dare to point out that we could do a better job of ensuring that every Canadian has access to the medical care and the doctors that they need? What if you suggest that there may be ways to reduce violence against vulnerable people and get money out of politics? How will people respond?

You will hear a litany of all the ways in which Americans are so much worse. You will hear about the half a million Americans who declare bankruptcy each year because of medical bills. They will tell you about the mass shootings that occur, on average, daily down there. They will tell you all about “Citizens United” and how it has put politics in the U.S. up for sale to the highest bidder.

“God, I thank you that I am not American.” That is all that such responses amount to. I am absolutely someone who is proud and thankful indeed to be a Canadian. But, if the best we can muster to celebrate that today is to say, “At least we’re not Americans,” or if we cannot ask more for our people because at least we’re not as bad as them, that is not patriotism. That is just the Pharisee’s prayer.

Religious Observances

To be fair, the Pharisee doesn’t *just* talk about how bad everyone else is in his prayer. He does say two things about himself: **“I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”** It is telling that he doesn’t point to any actions of kindness or justice.

These are religious duties that he is fulfilling. The “tenth” he speaks of would not have gone to the poor. These are actions, like the public praying in the temple, that are simply meant to boost his standing and reputation – to make him look good before others. So, this also is not about engaging in any worthwhile discussion about how the world could be better.

Our current level of discourse, therefore, has a lot in common with this Pharisaic prayer that Jesus described and condemned. Jesus says explicitly that this man left unjustified. And I have to say that I often feel equally despairing when I look at the present state of our discourse.

Descent to Pettiness and Despair

As we continually seek to make ourselves look better by putting other people and their ideas down, we only seem to spiral ever downwards. We find no justice for our world; we find only increasing pettiness and despair.

So Jesus, in telling us this story, seems to put his finger on a problem that plagues us to this very day, maybe even more now than ever. The Pharisee is not meant to be a typical Pharisee (by all historical accounts, they did not promote themselves by putting others down). He is a representation of this deep-seated human tendency.

Jesus’ Twist

But if I know Jesus, he is going to do more than just show us what the problem is. He is going to point us to a better way – a way that will be a sign that the kingdom of God has drawn near. And he shows us that better way in the person of the second man who prays in the temple.

Jesus loved to throw unexpected twists at his listeners – to make heroes out of the most despised people that they could think of. And this character is no exception. Everyone despised Tax Collectors because they worked for the hated Roman occupiers.

This is a typical teaching of Jesus. He was always saying that the most marginalized people imaginable would show us the way to the kingdom of God. He was constantly scandalizing people by speaking well of the disabled, prostitutes, Samaritans and Tax Collectors.

Looking to the Wrong People to Save Us

And there is his first answer to the problem we are having with the level of our discourse. We keep expecting the elites to fix it. Why can’t the government do something? Why can’t the billionaires who own all of our communication systems and social media do something about the algorithms? Why can’t the media just highlight the positive stories?

Jesus is telling us that we are looking to the wrong people to save us. After all, they are getting rich off the way things are. Why would they want anything to change?

No, Jesus is saying, we need to start paying attention to the ones who are on the margins – the unhoused, the addicts, the underemployed, the sexual and racial minorities. Surely those are the people that Jesus would populate his stories with today. He would once again insist that they have something to teach us about the kingdom of God.

An Expression of Humility

So, the person of the Tax Collector is part of Jesus' answer to what ails us. And so, of course, is his prayer. Perhaps he has no other choice, given his extremely low status in society, but his prayer is an expression of pure humility. He cannot play the game of making himself look good by putting other people down. There is no one of lower status that he could point to! So he speaks with perfect honesty.

That is the alternative that Jesus offers, therefore: humility and honesty. How can you practice humility and so show the world that there are better ways? Here are a few questions you can ask of yourself as you engage with people in the world.

Ask How You Are Being Manipulated

First of all, whenever you receive any sort of message that provokes in you some kind of emotional response, ask yourself why. Is someone (or some algorithm) manipulating you to provoke that response? If so, why? What are they trying to get you to do?

Simply become more aware of the words, messages and conversations that come before you. They are not coming from nowhere. Someone has been engineering the discourse we are having, and if you are aware of what they are doing, you will find more freedom not to participate in it.

Consider Your Discourse

Secondly, consider carefully how you respond to people. If what you say makes you feel good because it is true or because it is just, that is wonderful. But if it makes you feel good because you are putting someone else down or demonstrating your superiority, you really ought to ask yourself whether it needs to be said.

If you approach every conversation with the humility that allows you to be yourself and not put someone else down to feel good about yourself, you will change that conversation. That's the humility we are going to need.

Yes, this parable of Jesus comes to us from a long, long time ago and a world far away. But do not miss the wisdom that Jesus has for us today. It will save us and transform us.