

## SERMON FOR THE 12<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 23 August 2009)

**Text:** To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "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.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

We had a good Bible study on Wednesday again. What struck me the most during this Bible study was a reflection on the *nature* of God. Usually when we reflect on God's nature, we think about his power, that he is an almighty God, or we think of his great mercy and compassion. But on Wednesday we were made aware of another aspect of God's nature, and that is, his total humbleness.

In the light of the fact that He *is* the *creator of the universe* his humbleness is all the more striking. It is portrayed in various Bible verses. We read, for example, Matthew 11, Jesus saying about himself: "***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest***" (v.28). And then he encourage us to come by saying these words: "***... for I am gentle and humble in heart***" (v.28-29). "Humble" means here: I am not going to judge you. I come right down to your level.

This is repeated in Philippians 2 where Paul writes about Jesus: "***Who being in very nature God... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant***" (v.6f). That is the level where he meets us.

We see this humbleness also clearly portrayed at the Last Supper in John 13. Jesus gets up from the table, pours water into a basin and then literally kneels down to wash the feet of his disciples. This is not just an "act", something he "performs" for us to follow. That is *who he is*. He is humble. That is his nature. And because that is his nature he has a heart for the weak. And that is why he exalts those who humble themselves and humbles those who exalt themselves.

That is exactly the topic explored in the parable I just read. In fact, this parable is addressed to those who are confident of their "own" righteousness and look down on others. It is addressed to those who lack humbleness.

The story is about two people that go to the temple to pray. The one person one would have expected to find there is the Pharisee. By the way, there were two times for public prayer in ancient Israel: One at 9 in the morning and the other at 3 in the afternoon. The Pharisees would have attended both times - without exception. It was important to them. But for the original listeners to find a tax-collector entering the temple for prayer would have been a huge surprise. There is not a single reference in the Bible of a tax-collector ever going to the temple. In fact, being obvious sinners they were barred by the religious authorities from entering the temple.

But this is a parable - a story. And as all stories of Jesus it is a story of contrasts and surprises that rattle and shock his listeners.

The Pharisee is the first one that prays. At first glance there seems nothing wrong with his prayer. He raises his hands to the heavens, as it was customary in those days, and says a “prayer of thanks”. He starts his prayer with the words, “**God, I thank you...**”. And then he reflects on what God had worked in and through his life.

Two things are highlighted. First the Pharisee thankfully reflects on his practice of fasting. Fasting was a way of communicating your distress to God. It was always associated with grief. If you lose your spouse, for example, you may experience a period where you are unable to eat. Conscious fasting was a way of expressing grief for one's sinfulness before God. The Law of God stipulated that all Israelites should fast at least one day a year. That was on the Day of Atonement, when a lamb was slaughtered for the sins of Israel. But this Pharisee fasted twice a week, exceeding what God expected.

The Pharisee then continues to praise God for his ability to tithe. Giving one-tenth was also a “law” God gave to his people. Originally this law did not apply to everybody. It only applied to those who received land from God. And they had to tithe to help those who didn't get any land. But the Pharisees were concerned that they may receive a product from somebody who did not tithe. As a result they tithed “everything” they got. That is what the Pharisee in this parable says. He says: “**God, I thank ... that I give a tenth of all I get**”. Again, he does more than the law of God required.

The tax-collector on the other hand is a catastrophe, who from the perspective of Jesus' listeners was rightly barred from entering the temple. We never read of tax-collectors fasting. Nor did they tithe. On the contrary they were swindlers of the best kind. Unfortunately the Roman tax system was prone for abuse and exploitation. The way it worked was that the Romans only determined what “they” wanted and whatever the tax-collector collected over and above that amount, he could pocket himself. Most of them became rich. And when it happened everybody knew, they overcharged. Worst of all was, they cheated their own people. No wonder they were barred from the temple and excluded from God's people.

But the *shock* of Jesus' parable is that after saying their respective prayers not the law abiding Pharisee but the tax-collector goes home justified. Why?

A closer look at the Pharisees' prayer shows, there is no *humbleness* whatsoever in his prayer. He may thank God, but the prayer is all about *himself*. This we see already in the *manner* his prayer is spoken. He stands up and prays “about himself”, we read. His weekly fasting is not an act of repentance, but something he does for all those who don't fast. It is a vicarious act on behalf of others who aren't as good as he is.

The same is true for his tithing. Strictly speaking the Pharisee tithes not out of gratefulness for what God had given him, but he tithes also for those who don't tithe.

But in order to present himself in this vicarious position to God (see what I do for others!), he needs these others to compare himself with. The tax-collector is a perfect figure to place the Pharisee in a good light. So, when the Pharisee stands before God, he strictly speaking takes the tax-collector with him. And he thanks God, that he is not such a cheat and swindler like this tax-collector. In other words, when God asks him about his life, he can answer: “I am better than

this tax-collector”.

We do it all the time ourselves. If we don't express it, we think it: “I am better than this guy, or better than that guy”. This may be true. But God is not interested in whether you are better than somebody else. The tax-collector isn't the standard. God is the standard. And when I stand before God in prayer, it is all about “me and God” nobody else. Comparisons lead to arrogance. And arrogance is a sign: I never stand alone before God.

The tax-collector's life is indeed a mess. As we heard, he doesn't fast nor does he tithe. But the striking feature about this tax-collector in the parable is: He does not compare. We read, when he enters the temple, he stands “at a distance.” In other words, he stands there where he is *alone* before God. And when he looks up to this righteous, holy, and at the same time humble God, he is deeply humbled himself. He knows there is nothing that he can present to God, to make himself look better or more acceptable to God. The only words he can utter are: **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”**.

That is what happens, when you stand *alone* in the presence of God. We don't realise how through continuous comparisons, we destroy not only our relationships here on earth with one another, but also our relationship with God.

Now the tax-collector isn't an icon for us to follow. He should have learned to tithe and to fast. Nor is the Pharisee an icon for us to follow. He is self-righteous. We are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. He is the standard. Standing in his light, we are doomed of course. But he is humble. That is why he didn't cling to his heavenly glory. He became one of us. He became our servant. He washes our feet. And then he places “his” righteousness over us.

When Jesus wanted to wash the feet of Peter, Peter responded: **“No, you shall never wash my feet”** (John 13:8). That, by the way was not humbleness, but arrogance. “There is no need for you to do that *to me*. I am ok as I am”.

Maybe (at times) you say it as well: “I don't really need God in my life.” The tax-collector standing alone before God, knew: There is nothing that I need more, than Him. There is nothing I need more than his mercy!

This parable teaches us about prayer. Prayer is not a matter of me listing or presenting my good deeds to God: “Thank you, God that I am such a good Christian. Thank you God that I grew up in a home, where I learned not to cheat like others”. Prayer at its best is a moment of openness. It is a time when I consciously open myself to God. I place my life before him, with no cover-ups. And those are the moments I experience “healing”.

In this parable Jesus declares that whoever is open to the “mercy” of God is justified. Whoever is open to the “mercy” of God is placed in a right relationship with God through Jesus. And the more we do so, the more God's nature of humbleness rubs off on ourselves. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf