Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

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Humble Faith, Luke 18:9-14

When I was in high school there was a local preacher that was creating quite a stir, his name was Jimmy Shaddix. I went to hear him preach, and, after the service, I approached Jimmy, who was stationed at the front door. I told him, "Wow! That was a great sermon!" He corrected me; he said it wasn't him. He told me that it was all God! What I should have said to Jimmy was that was good for him, but for God that was just average. Pride goes before the fall. Not just preachers, any of us at times can be guilty of pride, thinking too highly of ourselves. In our passage this week, the Pharisee had reason to be prideful and he wanted to make sure everyone knew it. But in spite of all his prideful display, it wasn’t the Pharisee who went away justified in God's sight, rather it was the well known sinner and traitor to his own people, the tax collector. This is a thought provoking parable from Jesus. Who do you see yourself as - the Pharisee or the tax collector?

Commentary Lesson

During Jesus day in Jerusalem, the devout observed three prayer times daily - at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. Prayer was especially open for all to hear. Jesus tells of two men who went to the temple to pray. If we aren't careful in our times of worship our prayers can be for the listeners in the congregation and not primarily for the Holy One who is addressed in prayer. While the tone and message of the parable must have been a surprise to Jesus' listeners. This wasn't a new direction for Jesus. Early in his ministry, Jesus said, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Luke 7:33)

The Master also declared that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:7)

The Jewish law prescribed only one absolutely obligatory fast - that was on the day of Atonement. But those who desired to gain special merit fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. It was no doubt because these were the market days when Jerusalem was full of country people. The Levites were to receive a tithe of all of a person's produce (Numbers 18:21, Deuteronomy 14:22). But this proud Pharisee tithed everything, even things which there was no obligation to tithe. While it is easy to judge the Pharisee in the story. This Pharisee was typical of the worst in Pharisaism. There is a recorded prayer of a certain rabbi which goes like this, "I thank thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast put my part with those who sit in the Academy, and not with those who sit on the street-corners. For I rise early, and they rise early; I rise to the words of the law, and they to vain things. I labor and they labor; I labor and receive a reward, and they labor and receive no reward. I run and they run; I run to the life of the
world to come, and they to the pit of destruction." The Pharisee had enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be humble. As a result, his religion drove him away from the tax collector rather than toward him. The Pharisee didn't really go to pray; he went to inform God how good he was. He went to let God know how fortunate he was to have him on his team. Why do you think that the Pharisee's prayer was not accepted? Is it because he presumes he is righteous and is not? Does his lack of humility or his confidence in his own virtue exclude him from God's grace? Does the fact that he has separated himself from others signal that, although he may not realize it, he has separated himself from God as well?

In striking contrast there was a tax collector. He stood a far off, and would not even lift his eyes to God. The tax collector, no doubt a Jew who had turned his back on his own people and was working for the Romans to collect taxes. The guilt and stain of sin and regret was bigger than life for this tax collector. There was surely a hole in his heart that money and the things of this world couldn't fill. Desperate for peace and a new beginning, this sinner humbly cries out to God for mercy.

The parable leaves it to the reader to reflect upon the contrast between the two men who go to the temple to pray. Verse 14 affirms that the one who presumed he was righteous (v.9) and not like the unrighteous (v.11) was not made righteous, while the one who was painfully aware of his unrighteousness was made righteous. The parable, therefore, is not merely a study in contrasts but ends with a dramatic reversal. The proud are brought down and the humble are exalted.

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