

Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 84:1-7

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

A tax collector and a Pharisee walked into the temple. Sounds like the start of a joke. But fortunately for you, I couldn't find a joke. Rather, it is a story we find in Luke. In the temple, the tax collector approaches God with humility. Because of his humility, he would not even look up to heaven, would not look up to God. You may have seen a dog cower when its master tells the dog they are naughty or a bad dog. He confessed to God that he was a sinner. Tax collectors were considered sinners, because they were considered enemies of Israel. They collected the taxes from their own people, and paid them to their Roman overlords. Of course, the tax collector collected more than what the Romans requested. This was the tax collector's profit. They exploited their own people in the name of the empire. They were known to gouge their own people and became wealthy. They were part of an unjust system. Thus, tax collectors were seen as traitors, and thus traitors to God. Tax collectors were lumped with sinners. The audience knew what the tax collector was confessing. His remorse perhaps came from the demands of life at the expense of other people.

The Pharisee's, on the other hand, is boastful. Here was a religious leader who was proud of his obedience to God. He reminds God, "I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He could very well have intentionally said it loud enough for the tax collector and others to have heard him. Instead of a dog cowering, knowing it has done wrong, this Pharisee is like a rooster puffing out his chest, crowing, and strutting around, signaling "look at glorious me." The Pharisee is not only grateful that he is not a sinner. He is grateful to God that someone else has done things he hasn't.

In this story Jesus points out two characteristics of toxic faith that true disciples attempt to avoid. Unfortunately, these two traits of unhealthy religion still exist today, and disciples are called to resist them.

The first attribute is self-righteousness. As we see in the opening words of the passage, Jesus' parable was addressed to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." I like the way the New International Version translate it, those "who were confident of their own righteousness. The Pharisee in this story clearly felt superior to the other people. He essentially prayed, "Lord, I thank you that I'm better than everyone else." His prayer reeked of arrogance and self-righteousness. Unfortunately, arrogant religion is still alive and well.

The second characteristic of toxic religion that we see in this text is a judgmental spirit. In the opening words of our text today, Luke speaks of people who—again this is the New International Version translation--"looked down on everybody else." The Pharisee in this story exhibited severe judgment of others, including his fellow worshiper in the temple, a tax collector praying for mercy. Sadly, this kind of condemning and judgmental spirit can still be found among many Christians and churches today.

Churches have been judgmental for far too long. Judgmental church leaders, making judgmental proclamations, are not doing the church any favors. It is harming the church. In an article in *Christianity Today*, a journal from the conservative side of Christianity, had an article some years ago about how Fred Phelps, the infamous pastor of Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka Kansas, was discrediting the church. At the funeral of Matthew Shepherd, the young gay student who was killed in Wyoming for simply being gay, Phelps chanted, "Matt is in hell" and yelled that God hates fags. It

leads many in our society to believe that the church is hateful, self-righteous, arrogant. Whenever there has been some kind of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or earthquake, you can almost count on some church leader declaring this is God's punishment for any number of what they deem as sins, such as homosexuality. Rick Joyner, head of Morning Star Ministries, declared that Katrina was due to a gay pride parade in Key West and the gay celebration in New Orleans. He told an unnamed Senator that God sent the hurricane to show that "He's not gonna put up with this perversion anymore. These judgmental attitudes, this hate speech is one of the reasons many are staying away from the church. This hate speech has contributed to the decline of the church today.

Tony Campolo, an evangelical pastor, tells a story about his school years his school years. Tony knew a boy that his classmates constantly picked on. He was different from the other boys, sort of effeminate, so during junior high school some of the students began calling him a sissy. By high school they suspected he was a homosexual, and their judgment got worse. They called him "homo, fag, queer" and worse. They were merciless in their judgment of this boy.

Then one day, right after gym class, five boys cornered this boy in the locker room shower and urinated on him. Afterwards they walked off laughing. He showered again, dressed, and made it through the rest of the day. But the damage had been done; the breaking point had arrived. That night he hung himself in the basement of his house.

This young man made a horrible decision to kill himself. But when we judge and condemn others, we hurt them, we tear them down, we break their spirit, and

sometimes we literally destroy them. Self-righteous judging of others is always destructive. That's why Jesus said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" and "Let any of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."

Jesus concluded that it was the tax collector who went home justified. The Pharisee did not. Note the tax collector did not repent. So what was the difference? Humility! The tax collector acknowledged his dependency upon God, upon God's grace and mercy. We are not to trust in ourselves. Humility is being dependent upon God, not ourselves. Not our own achievements. That is difficult to do in our culture of overachievers. How seductive it is to trust in ourselves. We do our good duty and confess our sins each Sunday; we put our money in the plate or make that automatic payment online. We serve the church and the world in so many ways. Hooray for us. Boo for those who do not follow the rules we do—those whose lives are detestable, who should not be allowed to sit in the same pew with us. Humility does not judge others, for we recognize that we ourselves are not worthy; we are dependent upon God and God's grace.

It is all about God. Not about us. It is all about what God has done for us. We are totally dependent upon God's grace. In a culture of overachievers we need to learn to be dependent upon God's grace and not our own achievements.

Several years ago a man temporarily quit going to church. He was going through a difficult divorce, and for a while he stopped attending worship. Soon thereafter, a judgmental Christian coworker began hounding him to attend her church. She had no concern for his personal struggles; she just knew he was going to hell if he didn't go to church. Although she was extremely negative, judgmental and obnoxious, he tried for

many months to be nice to her. Finally, she wore him down. One day she said to my friend, "Don't you want to go to heaven?" In weary exasperation he responded, "Not if it's full of people like you."

Blessed be the Lord our God. Amen.