

# GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sunday Sermon, October 24, 2004  
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 25  
Reading: Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV)

Jesus also told this parable to some who trust in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

## “Where Your Heart Is”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Benjamin Franklin describes in his autobiography a program he designed for himself that deals with self-improvement. Franklin created a table of various virtues he thought he should cultivate in his life. He tells the story of how he worked on each one in turn until he more or less had incorporated that virtue into his life. He relates, however, that he made one fatal mistake in his plan to become perfect in every virtue. His mistake was that he left the virtue of humility for last and by the time he got to it, he was already so near perfection in every other area - that humility was next to impossible for him to obtain.

Franklin tells this story with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, but the story makes a serious point about humility and pride. Pride can corrupt even those of us striving to be good and generous as we can turn those occasions into even more pride. For instance, fight pride successfully for a moment and what happens? You find yourself saying “inwardly” - “Gosh, I really am humble. I

am much more humble than George, Martha, or somebody else you can easily name.

Have you ever found yourself thinking along these lines? “I cannot stand those conservatives/liberals. They think they are so much more Christian/smarter and well informed than anyone else. How in world can anyone vote for him?” Well, that is pride. We are going to be tempted to think this way at least for the next ten days and hopefully not beyond November 2. “If only people would view the world as I view the world, this world would be a much better place to live.”

The writer, Frederick Buechner, defines humility as thinking of yourself as neither better nor worse than you are. That is a good definition. As we think about humility, think of the humble person as one whose energy is so occupied with serving others, with seeking God’s will and enjoying God’s blessings and gifts, that there is very little time left over for worrying about being more or less humble than someone else. This is also a good way to practice humility.

In the gospel reading, it is easy to think that we should be more like the humble and penitent tax collector and less like the Pharisee. However, that reaction does not sound very humble. Pointing to the Pharisee and the tax collector, we often do two things. First, we identify immediately with the tax collector. Secondly, we start talking about how much we dislike the proud and hypocritical Pharisee - whom we usually identify with whoever is on the other side of whatever issue is the hottest topic of the day. If after hearing the parable, our reaction is “Thank God I’m not like that awful Pharisee”, we have missed the point.

We need to understand where the Pharisee is coming from. The Pharisees are usually the stock villains who possess no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Everyone knows that the Pharisees were awful people who were zealous about superficial rituals and rules. They did not love God as they should and certainly did not care all that much for their neighbors. This reputation has to go because it is inaccurate. The Pharisees were not the fundamentalists of their day. They did not read the Hebrew Bible literally. They understood that the Law of Moses given to the people while they still were a nomadic tribe, needed to be interpreted to suit the changing circumstances of the people. The Pharisees were inclusive and they were known for their enthusiasm for evangelism. They received Gentile converts expecting them to be baptized, to offer sacrifices at the Temple, to follow the Law and the rituals of the faith, and they expected that all men would

be circumcised. They did all this with great joy and enthusiasm because a religious person close to God did these things.

The Pharisees were not perfect. They did not do everything they professed was God's will. Jesus, in Matthew 23, said so himself, "Do what they say and not what they do." On the surface, the Pharisee in the parable is presented in a much more favorable light than we expect. Fasting was a sign of penance and tithing ensured that those in Israel that did have land provided for those who did not. Fasting and tithing are good things, not bad things, and you know that, especially if you have ever experienced their benefits.

However, it is in his prayer that the Pharisee succumbs to something of which many of us know the struggle. The world could be transformed if only people would get with the program. The Pharisee does his level best to get others to sign on so that they would experience the great things of God that he has discovered. Things like, God's presence in community, dining at a pure table with people who are like-minded in faith, studying the Torah with fellow travelers in the Pharisaic movement. All of these things and more connected one to God.

When someone does not sign on to such a program as joyfully as we would hope, it is easy to become resentful and discouraged. "Why don't people come to church more often?" "Why can't we do this at Good Shepherd?" "Why aren't we moving ahead faster?" Our passion for God's work and mission can degrade into frustration because others do not seem as enthusiastic as we are. Like the Pharisee, we focus more on shortcomings and less on gifts. Both the tax collector and the Pharisee are seeking God's blessing. It would have been better for the Pharisee to try to understand the tax collector than attempting to persuade God that he was superior to his neighbor.

There are times in the life of every pastor when the pastor literally lives at the church. Unfortunately, when you live at the church you are caring for the business of the church and that does not mean you are constantly praising God nor praying without ceasing. When this happens, you can easily become discouraged. You begin to think that you are the only person who cares about what the church is doing or should do. It is easy to question the commitment of others.

We will make our financial commitments to Good Shepherd later this year because we want to highlight special worship services the first two weeks of November. The 2005 pledge cards will be mailed to you the first week of November. When someone asks me what he or she should give financially to the church, they usually want to know what the minimum amount one should give to be "OK" with the church. Good Shepherd members have been very faithful in their financial stewardship and needing that same commitment this coming year should be of no surprise to anyone. We are making important changes - not just to get by for another year, but changes that will affect Good Shepherd in positive ways for the future. Is it coming as fast as I would like? No.

It is easy to slip into thinking that I am the only one supporting the congregation and that I am the only one with the program so that frustration sets in. When it comes to financial stewardship, do what you can and more to help Good Shepherd continue on the journey we began when we approved our Vision Statement. We are on the way to making the Vision Statement happen among us through the power of God's spirit leading us. In the meantime, we have many things for which to give thanks.

As we step out in faith and commitment, may we never take pride in our own discipleship compared to someone else or compared to another congregation. We are on a journey and others may be at a different place on that journey as we seek to be all that we can be together. God is the only one who can take us from where we are to where we want to go. From grace to grace, we are on the journey together. When we put ourselves above our brothers and sisters, we put ourselves above Christ, who lives in their hearts just as Christ lives in ours.

Thanks be to God. Amen

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