

## **Thank God That I Am Like Other People**

*October 28, 2007*

(Pentecost 22 - Year C)

Luke 18: 9-14

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

After hearing today's parable that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke, I wonder if I really like the concept of grace that much.

You see, grace is defined as God's love and favor towards us, unearned and undeserved.

And, in making an honest assessment of my life, I would say that I have spent much of my time, energy and effort in accomplishing well-earned and well-deserved achievements.

Which reminds me of this guy who lived across the street from us when I was growing up.  
His name was David Parker.

David was about 3 years older than I was.

And when we were younger, David always got into trouble at school.

He made terrible grades.

He used horrible language.

He was a bully.

He became such a handful for his parents that his parents sent him to a special, private school in town.

As a boy, we would all play football together in each other's front yards,  
But I would look down my nose at David and think:

"Thank God that I am not like other people.

I make straight A's, I do not cause my parents much trouble and I am going to be a better person because of it."

Years later, David Parker's life played out as I had imagined it would.

He barely graduated from high school.

He got into drugs.

He got arrested - many, many times.

When no one saw David around the neighborhood, it was correctly assumed that he was in jail.

And I would say to myself:

“Thank God that I am not like other people.

I am going to college, I will have a respectable job in the business world, and I am going to be a better person because of it.”

Today, Jesus tells us a parable, a story, in the Gospel of Luke  
It is a story that I don't like very much.

Two men go to the temple to pray:

A Pharisee and a tax collector.

The Pharisee prays, saying:

“Thank God that I am not like other people.

I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of my income to the temple.”

But the tax collector looks down at his feet, beating his breast and praying:

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

And then, the kicker is this:

Jesus tells us that the dishonest tax collector went home justified, instead of the decent and honest Pharisee.

I don't like this story very much,

Because the Pharisee here seems like a good guy.

He prays, he fasts, he gives.

But the tax collector is a weasel because, in Jesus' day, tax collectors didn't just collect taxes.

Tax collectors in Jesus' days collected way more than they were supposed to.

The tax collector steals, he lies, he betrays his own people.

And, to top it all off, all the tax collector does is to say that he is a

sinner.

There is no evidence in this story that the tax collector changes his life, no evidence that he gives back the money he has stolen or apologizes to anyone.

All he does is to say that he is a sinner.

And he'll probably keep saying and doing the same thing again tomorrow and the next day and the next day.

Yet Jesus says that this tax collector is the one who has been justified,  
Who has been made righteous,  
Who has been freed.

If I am honest with myself, I want the David Parker's of this world to pay for what they have done.

I want the tax collectors of this world to get it in the end.

I want those who are lazy, who steal, who deal drugs, who disrespect their parents, to pay for their bad choices.

And I want those who work hard to be better people to get what they have earned and deserved.

However, grace is God's love and favor toward us, unearned and undeserved.

Which makes me wonder if I really like the concept of grace that much.

You see, I believe that the key phrase in Jesus' parable is when the Pharisee says:

"Thank God I am not like other people."

There is an arrogance in that statement that is troubling to me,

Troubling because I have had that same thought in my heart a million times.

You know, we love to sing that hymn, Amazing Grace.

And in that hymn we sing:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*

However, sometimes I wonder if, in my heart, I am really singing:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch - like you.*

Because the most difficult part of understanding God's grace, is that God's grace and favor and love is given to each one of us: Equally, unearned, undeserved, without regard to our sins or our achievements.

For God does not love based upon report cards,  
God does not love based upon criminal records.  
God loves and pours out grace and favor on each one of us.

If we say:

“Thank God that I am not like other people”

Then, that arrogance and contempt blinds us to the cold, hard truth that we *are* like other people.

We are like every other human being who has ever walked this earth, in that all of us have messed up, all of us are sinners.

As the Apostle Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans:

“For there is no distinction, since all [of us] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus' parable, the tax collector is the one who is justified, is made right with God, is made free - because he gets it.

The tax collector is the one who gets it - that *all* of us are sinners.

Quite often, I hear people making this statement:

“Christianity is all about making us into better people.”

Frankly, I find little support for this statement in the teachings of Jesus, who asks us to follow him to the failure of the Cross, rather than to add achievements to our resume.

And making us into better people is certainly contrary to the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who teaches us in his writings that we are *not* saved on the basis of our works, but that we are made free by grace, by the undeserved and unearned love of God.

If you want to become a better person, then take the advice of Oprah or Dr. Phil.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 3:22b-23

But if you want to become free from our obsessive preoccupation with  
the sins and shortcomings of other people,  
If you want to be free from a religion based upon your achievements,  
If you want to be free from your sins,  
Then take the advice of Jesus,  
And look down at your feet and say:  
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

For the good news of the Christian Gospel is that  
We are loved equally, not on the basis of our shortcomings and sins,  
And not on the basis of our achievements.

So, I thank God for grace.  
I thank God that I *am* like other people.  
I thank God that his amazing grace has saved a wretch - like me.

AMEN.

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