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# Pharisee? Or Tax Collector?

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A Sermon By  
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*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-10-23-AB.mp3>.

## **Pharisee? Or Tax Collector?**

Luke 18:9-14

Ms. Anna Broadbent  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost  
October 23, 2016

O Throughout this fall we've been hanging out in the Gospel of Luke following along Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. During this time we've heard several parables that Jesus has offered. Being a slightly competitive person, parables often feel like a puzzle or a game to me... what's the correct answer, which character do I think is in the right, who do am I identifying within the story and is it who I should be identifying with based upon Jesus' message in the story?

Our parable today is more complex than it appears on the surface and yields some difficulty in my efforts to figure out which character I am racing to identify with. The first thing Jesus says in the parable is that we have two men in the temple, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Let's take a quick moment to discuss what we know about who the Pharisees and tax collectors as Jesus and his community would have known them.

Pharisees, in general, were Jewish religious leaders of the middle class. They were experts on scripture, what we now consider our Old Testament, and were very consistent about following Jewish law. They were the people who where religious and spiritual leaders within their communities... leaning back to my parable puzzle, I pick Pharisee... Yup! I'm a Pharisee!

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were despised by their Jewish community. They were Jews who were hired by the Roman Empire to collect taxes... but they very consistently skimmed a little, or a lot, off of the top of the pot. Tax collectors regularly took advantage of the communities they "served" by over charging them and stealing money from the Jewish people. Tax Collectors were also considered "unclean" because of their interactions with Gentiles. They were the obvious sinners of their day. Nope! I'm not interested in being a tax collector.

Perhaps we can take a moment to think through who these characters might be if Jesus was telling this story to modern day listeners. Can we agree that our friend, the Pharisee sounds much like our priests or pastors of today? In theory they are meant to be upstanding citizens and role models. They should be doing their best to walk and guide others in the way of Jesus.

So who might our tax collector be? For me, the easiest thing to think of the tax collector as is a pimp.

Prior to discerning a call to ministry and starting seminary I worked as a therapist with at-risk youth and their families in the district. My role was to try and help stabilize the family unit and keep the youth in the home if possible. On three separate occasions through 6 years of this work, I lost youth to the streets in the form of prostitution. To this day, these are some of my most

horrifying memories... getting the call that the youth I had been working with had been taken and manipulated into leaving their families for a life of pain and abuse haunt me. What's crazier is that the same man recruited two of these youth. This man was well known within his community and to the authorities. I cannot think of anyone more vile than someone who would prey upon the innocence of youth. Similar to the tax collector, this pimp is my perceived scum of society.

Let's go back to our story. In the temple we've got our Pharisee and our tax collector, or pastor and our pimp. Jesus tells us that both men pray... the Pharisee, with his head lifted, looking around the room proudly boasts of his religious achievements. I fast twice a week and I tithe 10% of all I have.... Ohh and by the way, thank you that I'm not like this tax collector over there in the corner. It's as if the Pharisee was giving himself a spiritual high five! The tax collector, on the other hand, doesn't even lift his head and says the simplest prayer... Be merciful upon me, a sinner.

The twist in the story comes when Jesus says that it is the tax collector who goes home justified... the pimp is justified. WHAT??

Why is it that the tax collector is justified? His sins are obvious and abundant.

Here's what I have to offer in response to this twist Jesus offers. The tax collector was humble enough to feel the weight of his sins and bring himself before God with that humility. The Pharisee, in stark contrast, was boastful of his religious successes and in the midst of his "prayer" he even cuts down his neighbor. He breaks the ultimate commandment "love the lord your god with all your heart and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself"... he is hating on his neighbor.

There's a part of me that is disappointed by this parable. In this parable I can't win. There isn't a right answer here... there isn't a character better or above another character. These two men do have something in common. They are both sinners, the difference is one acknowledges his sin. This is what Jesus is pointing us to. This is a parable about prayer. Jesus is guiding us to understand something about ourselves and how we bring ourselves to prayer. I've come to a realization... I am both a Pharisee and a tax collector, a pastor and a pimp. I am extremely guilty of being pious and self-righteous, leaning and lifting up my own good deeds and shouting them out for the entire world to hear. I am also a sinner in the world and once in a while the weight of my sin humbles me enough to recognize who I really am and beg God for mercy. My guess, if we are all being honest, we are all Pharisees and Tax Collectors from time to time.

This year, we are celebrating a year of Sharing Grace. Here's the tricky thing about Grace... in order share Grace we need to receive Grace. Receiving Grace is an extremely difficult thing, because it requires humility and an acknowledgement of our sins and our short comings and that is a very painful thing to do. Our tax collector and our pimp in this story had the beautiful opportunity to receive grace and hopefully share grace in the future. Ohh I would love to see what happens to our tax collector in the future, but I would also love to see the day that the Pharisee comes to the temple feeling the true weight of his sins and is begging for mercy as well.

In a few minutes we will be celebrating the Eucharist together... my prayer for all of us is that we will be able to take a note from our tax collector and come to this table in a state of humility so we can receive one of the most powerful forms of grace available to us.

So whether you are a Pharisee or a tax collector, a pastor or a pimp you are welcome at this table.