

## **THE NEW LIFE: AUTHENTIC LIVES**

**LUKE 18:9-14**

**OCTOBER 28, 2007—NEW MEMBERS; BIBLES TO 3<sup>RD</sup> AND 7<sup>TH</sup> GRADERS  
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Today's parable from Luke provides as good a reason to read the Bible as we'll find—whether you are in the third grade or the winter of life—people who read the Bible don't stay the same, they change profoundly, inwardly.

Like dynamite that comes in small, inconspicuous packages today's parable seems in its five verses small and predictable: a Pharisee and tax collector at prayer. We are already conditioned to the contrast between these two figures and can anticipate who in the story will be the good guy and who the bad guy.

But such a reading merely skims the spiritual surface of Jesus' story and misses the point. The Pharisee, arrogant as he is, is not a venomous villain, nor the publican, admirably humble, some generous Joe the bartender. Such portrayals are the stuff of cheap novels.

You see, if we stereotype them villain and hero then they get what they deserve.

And here's the dynamite: our relationship to God is not about getting what we get because we deserve it; but in spite of our deserving it. That is a message that runs counter to our sense of fair play and were it not for our reading the bible and hearing this message again and again we might never get it.

I'd like to explore with you on this day when we distribute bibles to our children and receive new members into the life and fellowship of this congregation just what this explosive little story might be saying to us.

A friend of mine recently visited a mega-church and was given a tour by one of the pastors. When he noticed the absence of any cross in the sanctuary or confession of sin in the morning program and asked his host about these omissions was told that "suffering and sin don't market very well."

Nor should we be surprised. While on the one hand our culture is carefully crafted around selling everything from toothpaste to tax assistance to make us feel better about ourselves; the church on the other hand has repeated until fairly recently the drumbeat that we are poor and wretched sinners.

So for some churches effective growth strategy sells religion on the basis of making people feel better about themselves—there are lots of things you can do to "Become the Best You"—the title of one pastor's new book.

But Jesus' parable today is not about doing anything to improve my life. It is not about the salvific power of diets and exercise or making \$50K at home in my spare time.

It is about my relationship to God. It is about self-honesty. It is about recognizing who I am as a human being, who God is as my Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer.

In my own life this relationship is like the wheels on my car that need to be realigned from time to time. The bumps and bruises of life, like potholes, jar my spiritual alignment. I find myself veering off the path of depending on God and into the woods of self-justification.

Now if anyone in the Jewish community would not go home justified it would be a tax collector—working for an occupation government; taking taxes from his own people; participating in and benefiting from a cruel and corrupt system; politically a traitor; religiously unclean. In short, reprehensible.

Yet, while his life is offensive his prayer is in the spirit of Psalm 51: “Create in me O God a clean heart for I know well my misdeeds.”

But the Pharisee is the opposite. The Pharisee lives in accordance with the law; his prayer sounds like that of Psalm 17: “I have not strayed from the course of duty; I have followed thy path and never stumbled; I call upon thee O God for thou wilt answer me; bend down thy ear to me; listen to my words.” Self-justifying, satisfied, perhaps even arrogant.

There is an interesting story about two of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest philosophers: Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Russell, a generation older than Wittgenstein, sponsored the younger man at Cambridge after the German sent his brief reflections on philosophy that turned the intellectual world upside down.

The story goes this way: both men of influence and privilege, Russell made a loud and public declaration of his opposition to British participation in WWI while Wittgenstein, living in Vienna, quietly enlisted in the German military and served five years on the front line and as a prisoner of war.

While Russell said his duty to oppose the war came to him unequivocally as if he had heard the voice of God, Wittgenstein reflecting on how he had changed because of the war said, “I am slightly clearer in my own mind about my lack of decency. I am far too bad to be able to theorize about myself; I shall either remain a swine or [hopefully] improve.”<sup>i</sup>

What is it that causes one man to draw attention to his righteousness and another to acknowledge and confess his shortcomings?

Fred Buechner said, I am a part-time Christian because part of the time seems to be the most I can manage to live out my faith: Christian part of the time when certain things seem real and important and the rest of the time not Christian in any sense that I can believe matters much to anybody. Any Christian who is not a hero, Leon Bloy wrote, is a pig, which is a harder way of saying the same thing.<sup>ii</sup>

The tax collector is aware of his shortcomings just as Buechner is aware of the times he misses the mark of Christ-like living because he clearly sees the distance between himself and God.

And there, I think, is the crux of the authentic life—seeing how low we are and how high God is. I say this not to suggest that we become self-loathing worms but to identify how some have been transformed from self-absorbed living into God’s grateful children.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the very next story in Luke is Jesus reprimanding the disciples for keeping the children away, telling them that anyone who has the faith of a child, trustful, dependent and honest, will enter the kingdom of heaven. A striking contrast with the faith of the self-congratulating, image-seeking Pharisee.

Today's story is about the ultimate failure of my own efforts to prop up my own life and absolve myself from my own sin.

The ancient impulse to elevate and equate ourselves with God is very human and not at all the same thing as the healthy habits of self care and attention to one's wellbeing.

But even taking vitamins, watching your diet and getting regular exercise could turn into an attempt to play God and control your life. Indeed, religious ritual became for the Pharisee a kind of obsessive spiritual regimen that in his mind justified his life and guaranteed salvation.

There is a shift away from depending on God and relying on some spirituality or health or investment philosophy or whatever exempts some part of me from surrendering to God. Hopefully, I won't need God except for a crisis; and if I plan for that maybe God won't be necessary even then.

Contrast that with the publican or the veteran returned from war or anyone of us after life intervenes and our best laid plans implode before some unexpected or unpredictable event. Anything can humble us.

Just last week returning from a trip to New York, feeling pretty good about my contribution to Auburn Seminary as a board member, having knocked off a ten mile run with my son in Riverside Park—training for our marathon, awaiting the production of my little chapbook of poems, I boarded the US Air flight back to Buffalo. Thirty six hours later in the grip of one of my worst colds in memory I discovered my personal achievements did not make me impervious to illness.

You see, it was just enough sickness to humble me and force me to ask for help. My prayer was a cry for healing and both a thanksgiving and confession for the gift of health which I so easily take for granted.

Until something knocks us off our blocks we think we're pretty hot stuff. But if you spend your days, like the publican, threatening your neighbors to pay the Roman head tax; or if you come through war, like Wittgenstein, where you've seen and participated in killing; or if you get sick; or if you rediscover your mortality in some humbling way then there's good reason to throw yourself on God's mercy.

And this is exactly what the publican did. Making no fuss about his horrid life he asks God for help. He knows he is a greedy bully and does not try to explain his extortionist business by saying to God or himself he has debts to pay or he'll leave a nice planned gift in his will for the synagogue. He's simply honest and knows that there is no human hand that can cure him but only God.

When Jesus told the Pharisees this lowly tax collector was the one God would forgive, you could hear the infrastructure of their religious-industrial complex collapsing like an old building being raised for new construction.

It's Reformation Sunday. Today's story reminds us of the explosive power of the Reformer's mantra that reconstructed the church: we are saved by grace and faith alone—not the intensity of the spiritual practices we observe, or wealth we tithe, or number of bible studies we attend.

Our relationship to God hinges on the condition of our hearts. Arrogant and closed or humble and open? Everything else—spiritual practice, stewardship, study of the faith, abundant life follows or not.

The lowly tax collector asked for help and was given his life back.

A friend of mine just published a book on Vincent Van Gogh called *The Mystery of the Night Café: the hidden key to the spirituality of Vincent Van Gogh*.

Toward the end of the book he says this, he says, “the work of Vincent Van Gogh shares with the Gospel of Luke the affirmation that truth emerges for us among the outcasts and suffering of society, and that we are called to join with them if we are to engage creatively in the ways of healing.”

That’s the stunning, surprising, explosive Good News today: it’s not our competence and expertise that lead to spiritual healing, wholeness and deep change in a human life but the humble prayer of a sinner crying out for the mercy of God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 35ff.

<sup>ii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (Chicago: Seabury Press, 1970) introduction.