

The Righteous Pharisee & Repentant Tax Collector

A Gospel Reflection from Brian Wigger

Is this new or are just more aware of it? Hatred and contempt are everywhere. They are in our government houses, in our communities, in our churches, and in our families. We are struggling, mostly without success, to be civil with each other, let alone respect each other. Why is this happening and intensifying?

It seems to me, at least, on both sides, we are often justifying this hatred on moral grounds, even biblical grounds, claiming that the Gospel itself gives us grounds for our disrespect - *My truth is so right and your truth is so wrong that I can disrespect you and I have biblical grounds to hate you.*

The gospel this Sunday presents us with a striking parable: the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisees were a very intelligent group of Jews in Jesus' day: they were powerful, ritualistic, and rigid class that wanted to keep themselves pure. Tax collectors on the other hand were despised because they were Jews who cooperated with the Romans that occupied Israel and they often took more money than they were supposed to and simply pocketed it. Jesus speaks to the crowd gathered around him and paints the scene of these two contrasting men who find themselves praying in the temple at the same time.

The Pharisee exclaims to himself, *"O Lord, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity, greedy, dishonest, adulterous, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of my income to the Temple."* Meanwhile the humble tax collector stands back in the shadows, beats his breast looking downcast and prays to God saying, *"O God, have mercy on me a sinner."* Jesus tells us that the tax collector went home in the right, while the Pharisee did not. He adds, *whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."*

This parable points us to humility in a deep and radical way. Jesus shows us the sad reality of living with an inflated image of ourselves to the point of despising others. This is so contrary to our call as Christians to love our neighbor. Pride blinds us and hardens our hearts, making us despise what is weak in ourselves and in others.

Love welcomes what is weak and embraces it.

So often the Church and Christians have been criticized for being judgmental. Sadly, this has often been the case with dire consequence. In my humble opinion it is not possible to be judgmental and Christian: when we are judgmental, we are simply not being Christian.

One of the best descriptions of Christianity I've heard was from a Benedictine Monk who said that, *Christianity is one beggar telling another where he found bread.*"

Every human being is a beggar: we are wounded, we are imperfect, self-sufficient, we are not all-powerful, and we make mistakes. We are hungry and we need bread. A Christian is someone who knows where the bread is. But finding bread doesn't give us anything to boast about. We remain beggars; our hunger remains. It is simply that we realize how much we need bread and where to go find it. The good things that God gives us in life are not just for ourselves. He wants us to spread and share them with others. We are challenged whatever ground we stand on, to point others to the bread that truly satisfies so they, too, can taste its goodness and be filled.