Love and belonging, along with social acceptance, cooperation, and mutual regard are at the basis of human survival (besides the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and safety). In addition to these, self-actualization ranks pretty high on our human consciousness list; its purpose is to give us a sense of being well-rounded, complete and fulfilled. This search for meaning is both psychological and spiritual.

Who are we when we show up? Whom do we want to impress? What kind of footprint or legacy do we want to leave behind? I think these questions are behind the gospel lesson for today. When in prayer, are we capable of standing naked before God, who knows and sees all? Are we ready to confess our sins and affirm our dependence on God’s mercy? Or are we so blind and full of ourselves that we don’t even realize we are running little ads all the time, even in prayer, trying to sell to ourselves, to others and to God, a polished image of us that reveals our goodness, our worthiness, and therefore our lovability? Deep down we seek people’s love and acceptance. At times, we are so desperate and so emotionally insecure that we grasp at anything of human value and attach ourselves to anything spiritual for the purpose of earning and achieving meaning and respectability.

Religion with its set of rules can become the scorecard we present to God. Ethical living is important for our life together. That is the reason why God gave us the Ten Commandments and all other spiritual precepts and ordinances. But ethical living is not enough and true religion is more than that. The Pharisee of today’s story keeps all the precepts. He is telling the truth when he prays, “Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people: robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.” Though his self-righteousness is almost laughable, there is nothing inaccurate in his self-assessment. But what he is doing can be our temptation as well: We can use ethical living to pat ourselves on the back and turn our nose up in the air.

The Pharisee misses the true nature of the blessing of knowing the Law. He trusts in himself. His prayer of gratitude may be spoken to the Lord, but it is really about himself. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own actions and being. He is seeking his glory and not God’s face. In that, he has already received his reward ([Lk. 6:20-38](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+6%3A20-38&version=NrsV); [Mt. 6:1-21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A1-21&version=NrsV)). That’s why Jesus had to clarify God’s commands that we so easily manipulate for personal gratification and grandeur ([Lk. 10:25-28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+10%3A25-28&version=NrsV); [Mt. 22:36-40](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+22%3A36-40&version=NRSV)). The Pharisee claims to be a religious person, but does he really love those he despises—the thieves, rogues, adulterers, and the tax collectors?

And yet, watch out. It’s easy to fall into the temptation of declaring him a hypocrite. We may think of ourselves as righteous and pray: "Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to Scripture, and we have learned that we should always be humble." When we do that, aren’t we displaying pride in our alleged humility?

The tax collector is also telling the truth. He knows he is an embarrassment to society and an affront to God. Collecting taxes for the Romans is the way he supports himself and his family. He knows it is a messy business. He knows he is regarded with contempt. Crestfallen, he begs for mercy. He is too overwhelmed by his plight to take time to divide humanity into sides: the righteous and the unrighteous, the acceptable and the rejects. All he recognizes as he stands near the Temple is his own great need. He, therefore, stakes his hopes and claims not on anything he has done or deserved but entirely on the mercy of God.

Jesus assures us the tax collector went home justified.

It is easy to be attracted to the plight of the tax collector over the arrogance of the Pharisee. How can one be sympathetic to a self-celebrating arrogant? But maybe there is a gospel challenge for us: can we open our heart and expand our spiritual muscle to include those we dislike, those who are so different from us, even smug and self-assured? Do we think God is not

hurting and wanting to reach out to the Pharisee and show him true religiosity? God wants all to be saved.

Where do we fall? How do we show up? Are we aware that all we can give to God is already God’s? There is nothing to show for. There is nothing that we have and are that does not belong to God already. It’s not about us. It’s about God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly.

At the end of this story, the Pharisee will leave the Temple and return to his home righteous. This hasn't changed; he was righteous when he came up and righteous as he goes back down. The tax collector, however, will leave the Temple and go back down to his home justified, that is, accounted righteous by the Holy One of Israel. How has this happened? The tax collector makes neither sacrifice nor restitution. On what basis, then, is he named as righteous? On the basis of God's divine favor and compassion!

With this parable, we find ourselves, yet again, with nothing to claim but our dependence on God's mercy. When this happens and we forget, if only for a moment, our human-constructed divisions, and stand before God aware only of our need, then we, too, are justified by the God of Jesus and invited to return to our homes in mercy, grace, and gratitude.

May we learn from the mercy we receive; may our heart be simple and unencumbered by divisions and judgments; may we rejoice in the blessing of living a religious life dependent on God alone. Amen.