



2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Psalm 84:1-7; Luke 18:9-14

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Who is at the bottom of your list of respectable people? Who are the despicable ones you disdain, the ones you would never be caught dead being with?

In our times, convicted felons, fraudsters, bullies, liars, those engaged in criminal activities might be considered bottom feeders in respectable society. They are the ones who consistently violate social norms or laws, those who exploit others for personal gain, those who never take responsibility for their words and actions, those who make an art out of applying loopholes to avoid accountability.

Some Jews worked for the Roman administration, collecting taxes or overseeing trade. These tax collectors, often seen as collaborators who took more than what was due, were widely disliked and regarded by many as sinners or outsiders within their own community. They were deemed despicable and generally regarded with contempt and suspicion.

At the other end of the spectrum were the Pharisees – Jewish leaders who devoted themselves on obeying not only the Ten Commandments, but also many ceremonial and purity laws that shaped daily life and worship. Over time, they

developed detailed traditions intending to help ordinary people live out the Law in everyday circumstances. Some Pharisees came to be seen, or even saw themselves, as models of religious devotion and moral discipline. But their self-righteousness was easily detected. No one likes it when holiness degenerates into self-righteousness which slides into despising others.

Take the Pharisee of today's parable for instance. He comes before God with pride, enumerating a list of virtues and actions that have gained him the respect of society. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with ethical and upright behavior, with being a contributing member of society and a model of righteous living.

The Pharisee knows that Hebrew Scriptures consistently command care for orphans, widows, and foreigners—the society's most vulnerable. He demonstrates his awareness of God's expectation for compassion, justice, and mercy toward those struggling to survive. By sharing his resources, he fulfils a spiritual and ethical mandate.

He also maintains an unrequired, rigorous and jaw-dropping religious discipline: he fasts twice a week! This personal devotion is well beyond the only fast commanded in the Torah: the annual fast on the Day of Atonement (or, in Hebrew, Yom Kippur).

In the parable, the Pharisee adopts a legalistic approach to his relationship with God, presuming that his exemplary

lifestyle has granted him the right to stand before God and expect God's respect. He fails to understand that whatever he has comes from God—his life, his possessions, his talents, and his place in society—therefore, he misses the opportunity of experiencing joy and expressing gratitude.

Whatever he has; whatever he does; whatever he donates come about because God has given him. He is not giving back to God anything that isn't God's already. All that he has, all that we have is on loan from God. The pride isn't in the consideration of how much I have been able to do for God but in how much God has granted me to do, how many opportunities I have received to express my humanity and expand my heart. It's not how much I have given but how much God has allowed me to give. It's not how much of my stuff will I give away but how much of God's stuff am I going to keep for myself. Because it's all God's there is nothing for us to boast about. But the Pharisee doesn't understand that.

Joy is the awareness of the goodness of the Lord in our life, the certitude of the Presence of God, God's closeness and protection, God's care and providence. Joy is the knowledge of being seen, known, wanted and loved by the Lord, the assurance of belonging to God, the experience of being washed in the mercy of God, the confidence that God finds delight in us and loves us dearly. Joy dispels any fear and anxiety about pleasing to God. Joy is a heart abundantly

filled with divine grace, a life lived in the presence of God, eyes reflecting God's smile.

The Pharisees' reasoning demonstrated that he didn't get it. His righteousness, his personal piety, his contribution to the Temple were not for God but for his own self-promotion. He was putting himself on a pedestal with the hope of being noticed by God in addition of being noticed by his peers. His goal was to acquire divine respect after having achieved the people's respect. He was not worshipping God but himself.

That's spirituality gone bad! The pious Pharisee refers to himself 5 times in just 2 verses! He is quite enamored "with himself." Comparative prayer is not true prayer. There are still anxiety, insecurity and judgment at play. We may not do that during prayer, but we look at each other with that attitude.

Then there's the tax collector, who cannot even raise his eyes. Humility is expression of faith, acknowledgment of the need for and reception of grace, awareness that we cannot save ourselves, that our claimed and possessed "goodness" is a gift we cannot fabricate.

On Reformation Sunday, let us remember that it is God who saves us, operating in us, with us and through us when we are humble, sincere and available. Let us remember that we worship, love and serve God and not ourselves, that God provides us with all that we need. By God's grace, we need not merit God's favor but just receive and enjoy it, extending it to others in return. For this and more, praise God. Amen.