

Bridging the Space Between People

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text

I spoke on just this text three years ago and it gave me time to reflect on the passage of time. Christine and I had just joined you. Pastor Gary's last Sunday was one or two weeks in the past. We had just moved into the parsonage for a stay of 4-6 months, hoping to be of help to the congregation in its transition. Now here it has been, three years. That's life isn't it?

I debated whether I should select another text so as not to repeat myself. But then I thought, 'No...life has changed us all in the last three years. I have changed. So have you. Maybe the passage will come alive in a *different* way as we reread it. Perhaps some new shade of truth will make its way to the surface.'

There is a principal of biblical interpretation here. It is that as we change and grow the Word takes on new levels of meaning. There is not one immutable understanding of any passage – the Word comes to us a dynamic truth. I take this to be the meaning of the Book of Hebrews when it says:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

This is one of the most iconic and famous parables in Luke. I've written a good deal about it. The structure of the passage is simple. There is an introductory statement about why the story is being told; it is what we call a narrator's aside.

Then we have the story itself, a charming and brief vignette about two men going up to the temple to pray. And there is a concluding "logion" as we say in gospel studies, where Jesus summarizes the point for us.

The fundamental point of the parable is not the least bit in doubt. Pride is anathema to communion with God, humility is essential to communion with God. But then, multiple layers of texture emerge as you reflect on the story. There is no such thing as a simple parable.

In the Text

The introduction in V 9:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

Here is the *narrator's aside* as in introduction to the story. This is the voice of the narrator who presumes to interpret a saying of Jesus for us, something of a rarity in the gospels. I could probably come up with a dozen examples.

The introductory statement is a genius example of irony and moral instruction.¹

First, we can't even get past this first sentence without a demonstration of how penetrating the story is going to be. I can't help but regard self-righteous religionists with contempt!

The story *begins* by shining a light on my own Pharisaic tendency to think I'm *right* and others are *wrong*. The first line illuminates my own self-deception. The joke is on me!

I have already learned something pretty valuable from the Lord Jesus. Hypocrisy is a very easy sin -even though I do feel I am exceptionally humble, I still take the point.

Vss 10-12:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

The Pharisee represents the perfection of practice of religion. He claims to be honest, upright, faithful to his spouse, he is not a traitor to his nation. It is a praiseworthy life.² He fasts twice a week when the OT only commands one fast a year for all Israel. He gives a tenth of everything he makes instead of only a tenth of what he grows. See note below.³

But his thanksgiving is a parody of his own self-deception. A parody of how spectacularly good most of us are about justifying ourselves in what *we think* is right. The Pharisee sees his reality in a completely self-affirming light – which is the very definition of hypocrisy. And I think a real problem with society's self-consciousness. We've lost our connection to a core meaning.

Of all the kinds of pride in which we humans so expertly engage – pride of wealth, or beauty, or position, or power; religious pride is the worst kind. Because religious pride seems to assert that God is on *my* side. God sees me as better than you. Which is self-deception. God isn't on anybody's side – God is truth. How shallow of me to think that he is on my side!

Vs 13:

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

The tax collector is the opposite of the perfection of practice. He is a traitor to his nation, a servant of the occupying Romans. He comes before God in his temple with nothing to offer, except humility.

Just imagine the self-loathing of this poor man, the sense of a ruined life, a vast disappointment in himself. Imagine the feeling that he was about to slip under the waves of chaos in his life. It is pretty poignant.

And yet, it was he who has the clearest understanding of God and his relationship to the Divine. It is he who finds justification before God that day. It was he who found the hope of reunion with God, through his humility. This is the gospel.

From the Text

Here are some observations on application.

Humility is a cardinal virtue in the life of faith – nothing good happens without it. Either between us and God and between each other. We do well to recite that from time to time – to remind ourselves.

Nowhere in the Bible is there a more simple and yet profound guide to the spiritual life than Michah 6:8:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

If we do that, the promise of God is that surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of your life.

Next, how do we find our way out of self-deception?

The way out is having a clear understanding of God. This is why we have been focussing on the Creed: ***I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*** Understanding this is the only way we can see our own humanity clearly.

It is the only way out of our self-deception. It is the only way to go down to our homes justified before God.

Without this concept of the oneness of God at the heart of our world view we are condemned to self-deception and relativism.⁴

Next. What matters in this lovely little story is the part that we don't get to see: what actually happens the next day. For the Lord says that both men ***...went down to his home...*** Our lives are ultimately judged, not by how we look to the *public*, by what happens at *home*.

Experiencing grace means going home and *living* a gracious life. For Jesus said, ***Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*** – that important little conjunction “as.” It's not that we earn forgiveness or grace, but that result of forgiveness and grace is its presence in our lifestyle.

And finally this. Have you ever ridden the underground in London? Did you notice the sign “Mind the Gap” as you got on.

I think we could observe that this story, is not just about the gap between God and us (bridged by grace), but also about *the space between people*. It is about the assumptions we make about others and importance of bridging that gap with real understanding of one another.

Pharisee and tax collector. Contempt on the one hand and shame on the other characterized their relationship. Understanding is the flip side of contempt.

I recently went to see Avatar again (2009). They have remade it for IMAX. The greeting among the beautiful blue people is “I see you.” And the problem at the centre of the story is that the voracious humans can't see anybody or anything except profit.

I always dream about how this scene in the temple could have resolved most beautifully. If Pharisee and tax collector could sidle up side-by-side before that altar, humble themselves, embrace one another, “see” each other, and walk out to meet the world reconciled, not only to God, but to one another. Then a better world would arise.

This is a pretty good definition for what a community of faith ought to be: a place where we mind the gap and “see” one another; we Pharisees and tax collectors all.

A friend recently told me about a term that is used in the grocery business – the centre of plate. The most important part of the grocery business is the protein. Meat, fish or poultry are at the “centre of plate” as it were. This is what you build around as you look for accompaniments to the meal, veggies, starches, drinks, etc. “It is the thing that is most inherently important to that particular meal.”⁵

In fact, as we think about the future together in these days, what is 'centre of plate' for us? Isn't it bridging the space between people? Doesn't that just sum up our mission somehow?

Why don't we just figure out how to bring people together? Let's just let everything else sort of take care of itself. Because that is all we really *need* to do. I think this parable shows us that this is the protein at the centre of the plate!

In spite of the perfection of practice by the Pharisee, and the absence of perfection in the life of the tax collector, there is the possibility of communion with God for us all. And if the tax collector could go down to his home justified before God, we all can.

Thanks be to God!

Amen

Benediction

And as our Psalmist for the week said, for us the ***river of God will be full of water of life*** (Ps 65:9). May your river run full of the water of life this week! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Irony is "language that normally signifies the opposite, typically of humorous or emphatic effect".

² The prayer has correlates in rabbinic and even modern Judaism. As in the daily prayer which says, "Thank you God that thou hast not made me a woman." Compare *m. Berakoth* 4.2 which deals with how one should pray, "I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, that thou has set my portion with those who sit in the Beth ha-Midrash and thou has not set my portion with those who sit in the street corners ...[pursuing] frivolous tasks."

³ For example, there is a lot of fasting in the Bible, but the only day of fasting commanded is the Day of Atonement, once a year for all Israel (Lev 16:29). And yet this Pharisee fasts twice a week. ... ***I give a tenth of all my income.*** In the Old Testament we are told to give 10% of what we farm on the Land of Israel. Strictly speaking, unless you are an Israelite farmer tithing doesn't apply to you. But this devout fellow isn't a farmer and he gives a tenth of everything that comes in from his shop or business or whatever. We Christians talk about tithing, but there aren't any commands about it. There is only our conscience and generosity to guide us. Why give to the church? Someday I'll talk more about it.

⁴ Partiality is to be "prejudiced in favor of a person, group, or side over another, as in a controversy." It is a clear teaching of the Bible is that God shows no partiality. ***For God shows no partiality,*** and again ... ***there is no partiality with him*** (Romans 2:11 and Eph 6:9. Also Acts 10:34; Gal 2:6; Col 3:25). In the Old Testament one of the primary principles was in play for centuries in Jewish theology was that God was partial to the Jews. It was the classical prophets and ultimately Jesus who made us to understand that God does not favour one group or ethnicity over another. But that God loves all people of the world equally. Jew and Gentile, which covers the lot of humanity. The word for "partiality" in all its forms in Greek is built on the word "face" (*prosōpon*). It is that perspective that judges things on the shallow criterion of how they look instead of how things truly exist. Is God on our side? Well, most of the woes of the world have arisen from a fanatical belief that God is on my side, not yours - that is, God is for our peoples or nations and against your peoples or nation.

It often seems to me that discourse about religion has been reduced to shouting over one another that God is on our side.

⁵ Thanks for the illustration Rick!