

If I told you a story about a pastor and a thief, who do you think would be the good guy, and who do you think would be the bad guy? Probably, the pastor would be the good guy and the thief would be the bad guy, right? At least I hope that's what your experience in life would lead you to believe.

Well, I do have a story for you today. It's a story that Jesus told about two people. But, in this story, Jesus does something surprising. He flips the expected roles of the characters. So, it would be like if I told you a story about a pastor and a thief, but the pastor was the bad guy and the thief was the good guy. Listen to this story from Luke 18, and you'll know what I mean:

⁹"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

¹³"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

So, do you see what I mean? Jesus flipped the expected roles of the characters in his story. His Jewish audience would have expected the Pharisee to be the good guy and the tax collector to be the bad guy, and to understand why that's true, let me explain who exactly these people would have been in Jewish society.

First, who were the Pharisees? That sounds like a simple question, but that question has had historians and theologians scratching their heads for centuries. Let me tell you what we do know.

The Pharisees were a group within the religion of Judaism. So, you know how Christianity has different groups with different beliefs, like Lutheran and Baptist and Methodist? Well, it's not too much of a stretch to say that Judaism did, too, and the Pharisees were one of those groups.

So, if you were part of the Pharisee group, what did you believe? What did you do? Generally speaking, the Pharisees were deeply concerned about keeping the laws that God had given them. In fact, they were so concerned about keeping God's laws that they followed other rules to keep them from even getting close to breaking God's laws.

Here's an example of what I mean: One time, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath Day, and the disciples began picking kernels of grain to eat. When the Pharisees saw this, they accused the disciples of breaking the Sabbath Day law, because you weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1,2). Yet, God never said that picking grain as you walk through a field should be considered work. But the Pharisees followed that rule because they didn't even want to get close to breaking the actual rule.

So, here's a very simplified summary of who the Pharisees were: The Pharisees were a group within the religion of Judaism who went to extreme lengths to make sure that they were being good.

Now, let's talk tax collectors. What comes to mind when you hear the name Benedict Arnold? Maybe something like "traitor" or "betrayal." That's because Benedict Arnold was an American military officer who defected to the British during the Revolutionary War. Well, you could say that the tax collectors of Jesus' day were the Benedict Arnolds of the Jewish people, and I'll tell you two reasons why.

First, they were Jewish people working for the Romans. The Romans were the hated occupiers of Israel. They were the oppressors of the Jewish people. To work for them was to be a traitor.

Second, the tax collector's job was to collect taxes from his fellow Jews and give them to the Romans. And it was expected that the tax collector would take more than necessary in order to line his own pockets. So, the tax collector was seen not only as a traitor, but as a thief, too.

Now, back to Jesus' story. Once again, do you see how Jesus flipped the expected roles of the characters in his story? Jesus' Jewish audience would have expected that Pharisee to be the perfect example of moral uprightness, to be the good guy, and tax collectors were known as traitors and thieves, as the bad guys. Yet, who walked away justified before God? Who does Jesus praise? Who's the good guy in the story? Not the Pharisee, but the tax collector.

The important question, then, is: Why? Why did Jesus condemn the Pharisee and commend the tax collector? The answer is simple: The Pharisee was convinced that being good would save him, while the tax collector was simply aware that he wasn't good enough for God. In other words, the Pharisee was self-righteous, while the tax collector was self-aware.

That raises an important question to ask yourself: Are you self-righteous or self-aware? I guess if you're looking to answer that question about yourself, you could look at what that Pharisee did. He compared himself to his fellowman, and determined that he was better. He said, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like those other miserable sinners!"

And maybe you think to yourself, "Well, I don't do anything like that. I'm not self-righteous like that." And maybe that's true. I haven't heard any of you stand up in church and say, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like those who didn't bother coming today!" And I have a hard time imagining someone jay-walking across the street in front of you and you shouting out your car window, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like this heartless criminal!"

But just because you don't act exactly like that Pharisee did, doesn't mean you aren't guilty of committing his sin. The sin of self-righteousness can certainly be loud and flamboyant, as in Jesus' story, but the self-righteous Pharisee in your life is more often subtle and persistent. And he likes to work with two devious, little words: at least.

At least I try to be good while there are so many others who don't seem to care at all. At least church is a part of my life while so many others only show up once or twice a year. At least my family gets along better than his. At least I don't gossip like she does. At least I care about my parents or my children more than some people I know. At least, at least, at least... As if God cares about that. As if God cares about how you stack up with someone else! As if that will be the determining factor on Judgment Day.

Here's the point, brothers and sisters: The Pharisee in Jesus' story believed something dangerous, something that Satan wants you to believe; he believed that he'd done enough to separate himself from the pack and elevate himself in God's eyes; he believed that he was the good guy. The tax collector, on the other hand, knew that he wasn't.

And let me ask you: Which attitude does your God and Savior prefer? He prefers the attitude of the tax collector, who said simply and beautifully, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

And it's not that Jesus wants to put you down. It's not that Jesus is some divine bully who enjoys watching you wallow in your own failure. No, Jesus knows this: Only when your heart has been pierced with the realization of its own unworthiness before God, then, and only then, is that heart ready to receive the message of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It's like a man who must accept the reality that he has a disease before he can begin to receive treatment. As Christ himself said: It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. In the same way, the self-righteous person claims no need for spiritual healing and he receives none. The self-aware, on the other hand, those aware of their spiritual sickness, they call out for Christ's healing and Christ gives it gladly.

Brothers, sisters, let's join all those everywhere who see their sinful condition and look to God for healing. Let us join the tax collector who trusts not in himself, but in the mercy of his God. Let's conclude this sermon by folding our hands, bowing our heads, and lifting our hearts to God.

Heavenly Father, we come before you like the tax collector and humbly pray: God, have mercy on us, for we are sinners. Forgive us the sins we commit willfully, and those we commit unknowingly.

Forgive us for the sins we have committed in the past and those we will commit today and in the future. Forgive us for our weakness when we know better.

We know that we ourselves have not earned this forgiveness, but it was won for us on the cross by your Son, Jesus Christ. We know that you hear our prayer and give us faith to believe your promise of redemption. We know that each blemish, each stain, each scar of guilt has been removed by the blood of your Son. Give us the strength each day to honor him as humble, grateful servants. It is in this Son's name that we pray. Amen.