

SERMON: To Be Lifted Up, Get Down on Your Knees      10-23-22  
TEXT:      Luke 18:9-14

When I was attending seminary in Richmond, Virginia, I spent one summer serving as a student pastor for a predominantly African American congregation. All Souls was a Presbyterian Church, so in general, the way they worshiped was standard fare. But there were a few things about this congregation that I was not accustomed to, that stemmed from their culture more than from their denominational affiliation.

For instance, during the pastoral prayers - or at any time I was leading them in prayer - some of these folks had the habit of chiming in. One person might agree verbally, saying, "yes, Lord," in response to part of the prayer. Another would add to my words of thanks, saying, "thank you, Jesus." Someone else might chime in with "praise be."

At first it was a bit distracting for me; I felt like they were interrupting my prayer. But once I got used to it, it felt like an

affirmation of my prayer. I felt like they were really connecting with the words I prayed and letting me know that I was speaking their very thoughts. This is when it became distracting for a very different reason.

Now I became nervous every time they didn't chime in. When the group was silent and I heard no expressions of "yes, Lord," or "thank you, Jesus," or "praise be," I began to wonder if I'd said something wrong. Maybe my prayer that day just wasn't hitting the mark or connecting with their thoughts. Maybe they even disagreed with part of my prayer.

I felt like I was being judged, not by the One Lord who determines where I will spend eternity. Never mind whether God thought my prayer was sincere. I was worried about whether it was good enough for other people.

It should come as no surprise to me. I know many people who are quite self-conscious about praying aloud in public, unless

they have prepared something in advance. And we are quick to judge one another on how we dress, how we think, how we speak. Basically everything. And we are quick to judge the Pharisee and the Tax Collector based on their prayers in the parable Jesus told, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

“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.’”

To be fair, the Pharisee is doing all the right things according to the law. In fasting twice a week, he actually goes beyond what the law requires. He *is* a good church member, an upstanding citizen. He is respected in the community. And, though offhandedly, he *does* credit God for who he is. But he is also arrogant and full of himself, and we don’t like his attitude. One commentary stated that the prayer of the Pharisee “is the prayer

of one who has no need of anyone or anything because he is already in himself perfect, especially with respect to the wretched tax collector.” (Meda Stamper, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), October 27, 2013) So to us, he’s the bad guy.

“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 way that Jesus tells it, the tax collector looks like the good guy. But he’s really *not* a good person. He cheats and he steals, collecting more than what is owed. He works for the Roman government, an accessory in their cheating and stealing. However, it is also true that the tax collectors were personally responsible for paying the government, so they had to collect extra in order to make a living for themselves. So, maybe it’s just the nature of his work, and we’re seeing who he really is in his heartfelt confession of sin. His posture is humble; it seems he’s hit rock bottom. In our book, he is the good guy.

Jesus concluded the parable saying, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In the parable, both men are standing as they pray. But we all know that kneeling is - or at least used to be - a common posture for prayer. To be on your knees is to bow before the Lord, to acknowledge that we are powerless in the presence of the one true power, the Almighty God. To be on your knees is a truly humble position.

Now, I can almost hear what you're thinking. "If I got down on my knees, I wouldn't be able to get up again!" But we can kneel figuratively, with an attitude of humility. Furthermore, when we bow our heads and close our eyes, we can't stand in judgment with those around us.

But the point of this parable is not arrogance versus humility. Nor is it regarding the problem of judging one another. It all comes down to trust. Listen again to how Luke introduced the parable: “[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

The Pharisees trusted in themselves and in their good works rather than trusting the mercy of God.

Jesus tells this parable as a reminder that we can do nothing to save ourselves. Only God can save us. And not one of us earns it.

But there’s a danger to this message, too, if we’re not careful. I noticed that when I see myself in the place of the humble, it doesn’t take long for me to become self-righteous in my humility. Suddenly I find myself looking at the Pharisee with

contempt and shaking my head. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. Not very humble, is he? Too bad he doesn't trust in God as much as I do."

David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote that "this parable is a trap. For as soon as we fall prey to the temptation to divide humanity into any kind of groups, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee. Whether our division is between righteous and sinners, as with the Pharisee, or even between the self-righteous and the humble, as with Luke, we are doomed. Anytime you draw a line between who's "in" and who's "out," this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side. Read this way, the parable ultimately escapes even its narrative setting and reveals that it is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly." (David Lose, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), October 23, 2016)

Lose goes on to boldly proclaim that the only correct interpretation of this parable brings us to “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.”

(David Lose, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), October 23, 2016)

God knows, we all need all the prayers we can get. And there's a good guy and a bad guy in all of us. So, instead of trying to lift ourselves up by putting others down, let's pray for one another and with one another. Let's get down on our knees, put our trust in God, and pray that all will be lifted up. To the glory of God!

AMEN.