

Lord Have Mercy!

We're all familiar with the snowball effect. You make a little snowball and, if the snow is just right, you can roll that little snowball down a steep hill and it will pick up more and more layers of snow and more and more momentum and weight until, at least theoretically it becomes a massive wrecking ball bowling over anything or anyone that gets in its way. And we might say that the parables of Jesus behave in a similar way: they begin as really simple little stories, but as we put them more and more into their full historical and cultural context, these simple little stories can gain momentum throughout our lives and become powerful avalanches of the Holy Spirit to break through the walls of prejudice and hate, pre-conceived ideas about ourselves and others.

In our parable today, two men come to God in prayer: one is a Pharisee, the other is a Tax collector. One is considered the odds-on favorite, the other, as we would say, "doesn't have a prayer." And yet there is a surprising outcome. The full *impact* of the parable, however, will only be felt as we put it into the context of the thought-world of the first century where among the Jews there was a great deal of. . .

Kingdom speculation

How would God's kingdom come? Since they were living under Roman occupation, they were constantly speculating about when and how that might change. The crucial issue for Jesus' audience was when would the LORD return to his Temple, forgive his people, restore their land and kick out the Gentile invaders? When would they, the chosen people, be vindicated in their claim to worship of the one true god? How and where and when would God' kingdom come?

Jesus addressed this speculation by saying, "the kingdom is among you." It's already here. You can reach out and take hold of it. It is well within your grasp. But don't think for a moment that there's any automatic benefits for those who simply presume this kingdom is theirs because they are *entitled* to it. Nevertheless there is *now* an *opportunity* that must be seized while there is time, for if not, there will be consequences. The only *speculation* right now is what might happen to a city and people who would reject God's Son? Might not that place face a judgment? For the kingdom of God *has come in and through Jesus*.

Now, Jesus has been very wise in revealing his messianic secret in stages; but as he rolls it out to more and more people, his teaching becomes more and more controversial among the kingdom speculators – especially *the Pharisees* who do *not* believe God's kingdom has yet arrived, and can see *nothing* in Jesus that remotely resembles their version of what was supposed to happen should the kingdom suddenly start to arrive.

Jesus, has already accepted the direction his life is taking, already embraced the cross as a foregone conclusion, already foreseeing his rejection by the Jewish rulers, his crucifixion and the subsequent judgment that will befall this people and their city. *His* priority *now* is to prepare his disciples with an . . .

Exit Strategy

Jesus must prepare his followers to fend for themselves in his absence (Lu 17:22-37). There will come a time when there will be absolutely nothing to be gained in hanging around Jerusalem, toughing-it-out and facing senseless torture and betrayal. Jesus foresees in the post-crucifixion years, as the situation in Palestine deteriorates, a window of opportunity when it will be time to flee. Jerusalem's doom will draw near and his followers must not be caught in the city when it falls. But the fall of this city will be the very *proof* that the followers of Jesus Christ are in

fact God's elect. The Christians will be prove to be the New Testament people of God when the city that so cruelly opposed and crucified their master is destroyed. And when that day comes, they are not to stay and fight for the survival of the Jewish state. They are not to be drawn into a senseless war with Rome. Jesus will die at the hands of the Roman state on the charge of being a Jewish rebel. But *they* are not to allow themselves to be sacrificed on the altar of anybody's political movement. For the day will come when the eagles – the Roman eagles – would gather to pick the carcass of a once-great city that rejected Jesus. When that happens they need to . . .

Make like Noah

It would be like the days of Noah when devastating judgement was about to befall those who failed to heed the warnings. Things would seem perfectly normal. They would be eating well, getting married, raising kids. . . But when the LORD acted in judgment, there would be no time to waste. They needed to be ready like Noah with his boat: have a bag packed and ready to go. They must not cling to the comforts of home, or to familiar surroundings, or traditional ways of thinking. They must not be pumped up with misguided patriotism, or bound by their closest family ties. For to do so would be to run the risk of being overtaken in a terrible time of judgment.

Sorry for this long introduction, but we have get the *context* in order to get closer to the meaning of the parable. We're building the snowball. It's a parable about prayer in the face of a dark foretelling of the future. It's a parable about what to do . . .

While you wait

In the meanwhile there will be many voices all around them urging them to join this or that movement. They are about to enter an era when they will "*long to see one of the days of the Son of Man but they will not see one.*"

By mid-first century there would be a growing sense of desperation among the Jews; a steady worsening of political conditions. The region would become more and more violent and volatile. And ordinary Jewish citizens – *including the Christians* would be vulnerable to recruitment by this or that conspiracy or the next big uprising. A whole string of would-be messiahs arise promising the moon. It would always end badly. But they must never buy in. They must always keep a bag packed, ready to run for it. There would be dissensions even among families and friends. Roman legions would sweep through town and village by night, go door to door seizing whoever they could lay their hands on. And *if* the disciples of Jesus escaped this, *if* they were among the *fortunate ones* to be "left behind," it would be by the skin of their teeth.

The first generation of Christians would experience this world as a cruel and *brutal* place. They would have to wrestle in prayer with that most difficult of all human questions:

Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?

Why are some are "taken" while others are left behind? Why do we, who have done no harm have to suffer along with the those who have deliberately taken up the sword? How can we continue to believe and bear witness that we are God's chosen people? For the first century Christians, there would be no easy answers.

Yet they would have the Scriptures. The purpose of the Scriptures is tell the story of God's salvation of Israel. God *loves* us and wants us to *love* him, and therefore he had no choice

but to create us with a *free will*. For love is a choice. But if we can choose to *love* God, then it follows that we also can choose NOT to. And the Bible tells the story of Israel as an example of what happens on a bigger scale with the broader human family – as an old rabbi once said:

“The Jews are just like everybody else, only more so.”

And when individuals and communities and nations make wrong choices, when leaders arise and take people into senseless wars and conflicts, there will inevitably be consequences that grieve *God’s* heart far more than our own.

We can understand this intellectually, but don’t tell that to someone whose one son has just been dragged away in the night, or someone whose lost a daughter to a senseless act of violence. Don’t tell that to someone who through no fault of their own is bullied, despised, and hated. And Jesus’ disciples will be in that place *soon*. And when they get there, they’re going to need some *pretty big snowballs* to punch through the darkness of the night. The two parables in Luke 18 are really about . . .

Effectual Prayer

The common theme in both parables in Luke 18 (The Widow and the Judge and then The Tax-collector and the Pharisee), is that the “chosen ones” will *not* be those one would expect if one were a major player in first-century Judaism.

God will not save the official or self-appointed guardians of Israel’s religion, but rather those “*who cry out to God day and night*” *without* presuming that they are any better or more righteous than anyone else. Those vindicated in the end will be those who have first been somehow *humbled* in the present circumstances; but in the end, they would be exalted on the day Israel’s god acts. And Jesus’ disciples must not let this focus be broken. They must never, ever, in the coming years, settle down to business as usual and while away their lives climbing the ladder of religious and social success. Because losing the radical, cutting edge of Christian discipleship can happen so easily. The question raised by this parable is not am I more like the “Pharisee” or more like the “Tax-collector?” It doesn’t matter what type of person we are. When we are seeking to be accepted by God our question must always be . . .

Am I making a fatal assumption?

Look with me please at Luke 18: 9 It says, “He . . .told this parable to some who *trusted in themselves* that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

That is a fatal mistake.

There are those in Jesus’ audience who presume that just because they had kept the Law of Moses, eaten all the right foods, said all the right prayers. . . because their *society* counts them among the ranks of the devote, they will be automatically included within the ranks of the true Israel and therefore would not be judged by God at the day of his coming.

The Pharisees, in particular, regarded non-Pharisees as second class citizens because they didn’t observe the Torah the same way they did. Their *presumption* was that the status of such people before God was, to say the least, pretty dodgy. You *might* be OK, but don’t count on it. If the observant Pharisee could point to some way that another had failed to keep Torah, then they could only assume that *that* person was not in a living covenant with God.

This is a disturbing arrogance. Why? Because what you see depends a lot on where you sit, and actually a lot of our most common presumptions about others are based on . . .

Deep-seated social prejudices

Tax-collectors, like the man in the parable, were widely regarded as dishonest and greedy – and often *they were*. They were routinely despised by ordinary Jews just as much as lepers. But the basic premise of Jesus' story is this: take two men at opposite ends of the grey scale of sin, put them front of God and let's just see what happens.

But in that first-century Jewish culture, there were very few shades of grey between black and white – at least with some people. Things were pretty black and white.

In reality, life is not quite that simple. In our day of modern mass media they call it “framing the narrative.” Take a story, any story. There has to be a good guy, and bad guy. There's *us* and there's *them*. The simpler you can make the story, the easier it is to tell, and the easier it is to tell, the easier it is to arouse a strong public reaction, which is after all the whole point. Because with the media, it's not about the content of the story, it's not about what's right and wrong, true and false. What it's really about, “stay tuned, when we come back we'll have more on this story “ It's all about keeping the viewers watching. Politicians do the same thing, “framing the narrative,” it's what's commonly known as “*spin*.” It's what keeps voters voting.

But “framing the narrative” like this takes the story out of it's context and allows us only to see the world through the distorted lens of social prejudice. Leaves us to see only what other people want us to see. But what *Jesus* wants is for his followers to keep in mind was that they must never be fooled by . . .

Public Perception

So we come to the parable:v9: "Two men went up to the temple to pray. . . “

The Temple is a public place, a large plaza where all kinds of people mingle together and see each other. Rub elbows. The Pharisee, is “standing by himself.” Keeping his elbows to himself. And praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers. . . . *or even like this tax collector*."

I think it is in those last few words that he crosses the line and excludes himself from any blessing from God. For it is one thing to thank God that we are not like certain types of people in the general public. Nobody *wants* to be a “thief, a rogue or an adulterer”, And given the stigma of that day, certainly not one would want to be *a tax collector*. But the Pharisee crosses the line when he demeans a total stranger he has never met, never once spoken one word to, but simply writes-off because of how society has *framed* that person.

How does this Pharisee perceive himself? “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” He too has been framed. He perceives himself through the things he *does publically*. No doubt this Pharisee sincerely *desired* to be righteous, but his great mistake is to imagine that he is capable of achieving a righteous state through his efforts – fasting, tithing, whatever. It would have been deeply disturbing to him to have suddenly found out that his whole approach was wrong since he was, after all, following a long-standing, reputable religious tradition.

But public perception can lead us to a wrong turn. Sometimes someone who is perceived as “not very religious” can suddenly “get religion”. They start taking things seriously, changing their habits, the way they dress, the way they talk. And eventually people begin to say, “boy, did he ever get religion!”

But in doing so, they can become like the man who gave CPR to a dying lion only to find the moment it recovered, it *devoured* him.

Religious life can be a brutal game because it forces people into positions where they are

perceived as perfect in the public eye. And even Christians, if they show any weakness or vulnerability can be judged by fellow believers just when they need love and acceptance the most. We can find ourselves in the cruel hands of forces that starve the heart and force one to keep up appearances that not only deceive others, but put one beyond the *help* of others. Pity this poor Pharisee who by public perception must deny the needs within.

The other man, the Tax-collector, is far more realistic. He knows he is a disgrace in the public eye. He's in the fearful grip of a deep need which he can do nothing to alleviate.

Pharisee had public perception on his side; but with friends like that, who needs enemies? He is seen in a favorable light by almost everyone. But no one sees what God sees. His righteousness is in fact, worthless. The Tax-collector, on the other hand, who was *seen* by all as a total write-off, as public enemy number one, acknowledges his short-comings and is justified through confession and repentance.

Today, you and I have the awesome privilege of reading this little parable in the light of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ Our Lord.

We can be hit with the full weight of the snowball. For we believe the one who told us this parable so long ago is now the one who listens to our prayers. He is the one, the *ONLY* one we have to please. And he couldn't care less about the public's perception of either you or me. Here's a snowball. Here's the truth that should bowl us over today. What God saw in the tax collector was not righteousness but

Spiritual Passion

Listen to this. Picture it in your mind:

“. . .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!"

Then Jesus says, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified. . .

The tax-collector appeals to God for *mercy*. We sometimes use the words grace and mercy interchangeably. But they're different. Grace is concerned with *guilt*. Mercy is concerned with *misery*. He *knows* he is guilty. He doesn't need anyone to tell him that. He knows that God is righteous and must condemn what is unrighteous – for that's who God is. But he wants to be "put out of his misery." He will not be content unless God takes him to a place where he is *comforted*. That's mercy. And it's the desire for God's presence that drives him on.

The other day I was reminded of the life of John Hyde. They called him "Praying Hyde." Born in Illinois in the 19th century, he was a missionary to India. He never married. For, as he explained, "I felt I wanted to give something to Jesus Christ who loved me so. I told the Lord I would not marry but be his altogether." His main work was not as a teacher or an evangelist but in praying. He suffered poor health- a heart condition, and after 19 years was sent back from India, first to England and then to America.

One woman said of him, "I do not remember that he ever talked about prayer: he prayed. Speaking sometimes four or five times a day, he would then spend half the night in prayer."

One missionary from England once prayed with him. Hyde fell to his knees, was five minutes in silence, then both men looked up with faces streaming with tears. Hyde said, "Oh, God!" and then was still again for five minutes. "Then came up from the depths of his heart such petitions for men as I have never heard before, and I rose from my knees to know what *real* prayer was." (From Celtic Daily Prayer, p119)

"God, be merciful, to me, a sinner." Amen.