

Being Wrong

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- [0 : 0 0] I apologize for my rather gravelly voice this morning. I was at the Brazil-Australia soccer game last night, standing in as the token Australian supporter for David Short.
- He was, of course, indisposed. Our text this morning is Luke chapter 18, verses 9 to 14, and you may want to turn to that. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.
- I remember it from childhood as the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. One of those classic cases where our insistence that only archaic language can really be religious language places the wrong idea entirely in the young child's mind, because publicans, in my childhood world, owned pubs.
- They sold wine and beer. The Pharisee, therefore, took on, in my mind, the contrastive shape of a fierce teetotaler. Probably Scottish, definitely Presbyterian.
- And the entire parable became mentally embroiled for me in the controversy about whether Christians should enjoy alcoholic beverages or not, and if they did, whether they should be self-righteous about it.
- [1 : 2 2] Wonderful things in the Bible I see. Some put there by you and some by me. Although the old hymns themselves are partly to blame, of course.
- There is a green hill far away which unremarkably lacks a city wall. There is a fountain filled with blood. Old Hammer House of horror movies come back into one's mind.
- Words paint pictures. And pictures stick in our minds, and they become the imaginative grid through which we hear the words.
- Sometimes this is fine, because the pictures in our heads help us to hear the words, and help us to understand them. Sometimes, though, it's not quite so okay, because our imaginations become set, become fixed, and they interfere with the hearing of the words.
- We hear, but we do not understand, because we see things in our mind's eye. It gets in the way. Example. What picture do you have in your mind when you hear the term tax collector?
- [2 : 3 2] It depends a little on whether you are a tax collector. Only a little. A tax collector once who was an elder in our church, a very popular local preacher. I don't think I ever heard him preach on this parable.
- I know for a fact that he did not have an identity crisis over being both a church elder and a tax collector. He once reported a fellow church member for tax evasion when he discovered he had not paid import duty on his car parked outside during the morning service.
- He did not have a problem being both. And we, for our part, did not typically begin our morning services by having this fellow up to the front to engage in breast-beating repentance while we all looked on, although we always did make sure, of course, that our cars were properly taxed.
- And the reason is this, that although we were all taxpayers, and although like most taxpayers everywhere, we resented that just a little, yet nobody thought really that tax paying was a very terrible thing.

But one seriously thought that tax collectors were above-averagely wicked people, whatever jokes they may tell privately. Tax collection in a modern Western democracy is simply one job.

- [3 : 53] Some people do, among the many that we might do. There's nothing especially noteworthy about it. And so if we are to hear this parable, we have to reframe our imaginations, have to carry ourselves in our minds across 20 centuries to ancient Palestine, very different time and place, very different political situation.

Palestine in Jesus' time is part of the Roman Empire, of course. It's an occupied territory. The Roman Empire is very interested in making profit. For Augustus has begun the practice of taking a census of the population of all the provinces of the empire, of valuing all the property with a view to assessing the two main taxes of Jesus' time.

The personal or poll tax, the land tax. But in addition to these, there are all sorts of indirect taxes, especially on the transport of goods.

And in addition to that, Jews are subject to religious taxes, temple tax or tithes for the priests. Double whammy of a tax burden.

And it creates considerable hardship in Judea. It often leads to both passive and violent resistance among the Jews. When we think of taxation in this context, we are thinking of economic oppression.

- [5 : 24] Taxation. Taxation largely for the benefit of a foreign power, largely for the benefit of the rich. Taxation without any representation, of course.

Taxation that is injurious and achieves very little for the common good. Tax collectors who appear in the Gospels, men like Zacchaeus, like Matthew, are the facilitators of economic oppression.

In fact, they increase it. Those days, direct taxation is undertaken by the government. Indirect taxation is given out to the highest bidder.

And these bidders and their employees are the tax collectors of our Gospel stories. And what they do is this. They contract to pay a certain sum to central government prior to collection from the people.

Then they and their cronies go and collect as much as they possibly can from the people because any surplus is obviously clear profit for them which they can keep.

- [6 : 34] Corrupt. It's dishonest. Repressive, particularly of the poor. Imagine yourself as a poor peasant farmer. It's battled with the soil and with the climate all year.

Just enough food for your family has a little surplus left over to trade. Take yourself off to market to one of the larger towns, Jericho, say. And after carrying your produce on your back for miles, dangerous territory where people are often robbed and killed, you eventually see the city.

And as you come to the city gate, the first thing you see there is a toll booth. Nice, fat tax collector sitting there waiting to take from you some of your produce.

giving no toil of his own to that project, taking the very food out of your children's mouths for the winter. He leaves your taxes, takes his percentage on top.

Later, he will pass on that money to Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho. He will take his percentage off the top and he will give the previously agreed amount to his superiors.

- [7 : 42] Drive at the market a poorer man than when you left home and you were already quite a poor man. How do you feel when you later meet Zacchaeus?

Trolling through Jericho in his fine, albeit curiously short, robes. Finders gathered round him. How do you feel? Empty to murder, perhaps?

Face him up a sycamore tree? Perhaps you make a mental note to dig out when you get home that copy of Das Kapital that you've been meaning to read for a while but never quite got around to.

No wonder that tax collectors are a hated and despised group in first century Judea, as they were throughout the Greco-Roman world. Roman and Hellenistic literature, they are lumped together with beggars, thieves, and robbers.

The rabbinic writings link them with robbers, murderers, and sinners. And in the Gospels, they are linked with sinners, prostitutes, and Gentiles. Get the picture.

[8 : 49] These are not nice people. They're not well-regarded people. We are not dealing, folks, with Revenue Canada. We are dealing with the mafia.

We are dealing with quizlings and traitors. We are dealing with callous, hard-hearted profiteers without conscience or compassion for their fellow man.

Not without reason. Pharisee in our story thanks God that he is not like the tax collector, nor indeed like extortioners, the unjust, or adulterers.

Of course, he doesn't want to be like a tax collector or any of these other folks. There are none of them people to be emulated. Well, so much for tax collectors.

What about Pharisees? What picture do you have in your mind when you hear the term Pharisee? We know that these are the bad guys of the Gospels, don't we?

[9 : 50] These are some of the more prominent enemies of Jesus. Thinking and their actions are constantly criticized by Jesus. What picture do you have in your mind?

Does the picture look anything like you? Or is the Pharisee always the other guy when you think of that? That fellow over there?

Reminded of another church service in which this parable was once preached to be followed in due course by the response of prayers. And in perhaps one of the more notable cases in church history of missing the point, the parishioner began the prayers thus, Oh God, we thank you that we are not like that ghastly Pharisee.

For the Pharisees, transport your imagination once again back to first century Palestine. A time of great upheaval in Judaism. All sorts of different ideas around about how best to respond to the circumstances of being a colony of empire and of being assaulted every day by an alien Greco-Roman culture.

Some Jews advocated accommodation to these circumstances. The ruling classes, including many Sadducees, did very nicely the text of Roman Empire.

[11 : 14] Some Jews advocate revolution, the zealots. For like Simon, perhaps Judas, who end up as disciples of Jesus. Others, like the Essenes, withdraw from normal society altogether.

The desert, where they can remain pure and unstained. And then, Pharisees. Pharisees are looking for a new commitment to the Jewish way of life.

A renewal of the covenant with God, but within society, instead of withdrawing from it. A Pharisee in the first century is not a separate person in the sense that that's what makes him who he is.

Pharisees are in fact lay people just like you and me. Well, not me, you. They retain their family and territorial allegiances, their friends and their networks, even while being Pharisees.

They are united only by their commitment to certain beliefs and practices, by their desire for a different kind of society. They are a voluntary association, a kind of, if you like, middle class, educated pressure group, a reform group.

[12 : 28] They are idealists. They are serious people, I dare say, some of them nice people. Or, certainly some of them, good people. Embrace ethical ideals with a passion.

They try to make a difference. They have a strong interest in tithing, in ritual purity, in keeping the Sabbath. All of these things which require commitment and sacrifice and thoughtfulness.

Now, indeed, as the Pharisee claims in our story, not like other people. Pharisees don't behave in overtly unethical ways.

High, the tenth of all their income, fast frequently are the Pharisees. Let's go to the parable.

It says, I told this story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people.

[13 : 31] Then, went to church to pray. One was a devout and evangelical Anglican. The other was a war criminal.

The Anglican posed and prayed like this, Oh God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this war criminal.

I tithe on all my income. I avoid moral impurity, especially sexual impurity. I keep Sunday special. Try to make a difference in my community and in my country.

While the war criminal slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, God, give mercy, forgive me.

Not the other one went home, made right with God. Walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. If you're content to be simply yourself, come more.

[14 : 42] Apologies to Eugene Peterson, whose text I have somewhat edited. It helps you to feel the shock Jesus' hearers must have felt when he first told this story.

It was no less than the shock caused by Jesus' own actions, because Jesus was, of course, quintessentially the scourge of the religious and the friend of sinners.

Remember that he ate and drank with tax collectors. Called a tax collector, Matthew, to be an apostle. And many tax collectors, says the Gospel of Matthew, believed in him.

Matthew 21, verse 32. Matthew 21, verse 32. The collaborators, the murderers of the poor and the weak. These were Jesus' companions.

It was such a scandal that the Gospels record Jesus' actions in befriending such people as one of the reasons why so many good, respectable folks were opposed to Jesus.

[15 : 55] And here in this story, Jesus identifies such a person, a tax collector, object of God's mercy.

And he suggests, people like us, about hard-working, serious, idealistic, middle-class people, have a problem with God.

moral, actually. Man is turning everything upside down. Being proclaimed by this scandalous tale.

Is Jesus saying that goodness does not matter? Whether we pursue right paths or wrong ones through life, in the end, it all comes down to which kind of prayers we say.

No. Elsewhere in the Gospels is full of encouragement and instruction to goodness and full of warnings against wickedness.

[17 : 09] There is an accounting to be offered at the end of days, he says. Of course, we are to strive with our whole hearts to embrace what is good. Perfect, he says, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

Of course, goodness matters. Of course, mere words uttered in church are no substitute for a life lived rightly before God and neighbor.

Tax collectors themselves in the Gospels who have heard the Gospel and understood it are expected to change their lives Zacchaeus. Of course, Jesus is not saying that goodness doesn't matter.

Is he perhaps saying then that even though goodness matters, we are not the ones to say what counts as goodness? Is the problem with the Pharisee that he dares to represent himself to God as good and the other person as not good?

Jesus never suggests in this story that the Pharisee is not describing things accurately. It really is the case that he is virtuous and the tax collector really is a scoundrel.

[18 : 22] The Bible never suggests that we ourselves should not distinguish between right and wrong and good and bad. We have to be able to distinguish them if you are going to pursue one and not the other.

What is Jesus saying? He lies in the opening line in verse 9. He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves because they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

As we read on, in fact, in Luke chapter 18, we find other stories on the same theme. We find a story about children, a childlike attitude to enter the kingdom of God.

And we are given two examples of the rich young ruler and Bartimaeus to help us too. And from all of this, it becomes clear that this story is really about two attitudes, two orientations of life.

Pharisee trusts in himself. Pharisee has been storing up goodness in his moral bank account, as it were.

[19 : 31] And he feels himself to be wealthy. And so he parades his riches before God in prayer. Of course, in so doing, he displays a massive misunderstanding of God and also of goodness because goodness is not simply a matter of actions but also of motivations, attitudes.

Do our actions arise out of love for God? Are they rooted in the sense of God's love and mercy, in humility? They arise out of love for our neighbor or from some other motivations, desires to please, duty, or whatever.

Pharisee in Jesus' story knows nothing about love, knows nothing about humility or trust, is not interested in God's mercy.

God's mercy. His goodness is motivated entirely by duty at best or self-interest at worst. Good. Safe.

There is money in our moral bank used to bargain with God. Because life is lacking in love for God, it is also lacking in love for his neighbor.

[20 : 52] Pharisee's morality is the morality of the smug, the patronizing, and the contemptuous. There is no compassion in it. No mercy. No hope.

This is goodness fashioned into a weapon rather than goodness employed as an embrace. Goodness accumulated for personal gain far than given away generously to those who need it.

Goodness of the horrible holy huddle. Not the goodness of Christ. In the end, it's goodness defined without God.

Who alone can tell us what goodness is. The goodness of those who imagine that they will be able to debate the matter of goodness with God. perhaps do a trade.

As this kind of goodness worse than useless doesn't accomplish anything, doesn't lead anywhere, no matter how devout, hardworking, serious, idealistic, and middle class they are.

[22 : 14] Pharisee trusts in himself. Collector trusts not in himself. Odd. Scoundrel.

He's a villain. He is a bad man. He doesn't yet have much of an ethic. He doesn't have many noble qualities. He cannot point yet to many good actions.

He's not even very good at praying. Have him up the front after this sermon to lead the response of prayers. Perhaps he'll leave the temple after prayers and begin to make things right with his victims.

Perhaps he'll need to first of all climb a tree invited to eat and drink with Jesus. Perhaps in due course his life will be better than it has been. Not yet.

Maybe this will happen if he understands the gospel of Jesus. does happen. Goodness that he exhibits will be true goodness.

[23 : 19] It arises out of love and compassion. Not out of duty, smugness or superiority. But the tax collector ends in the right place.

He does not strut his religious stuff before God. He does not pontificate before the Almighty suffering from the delusion that goodness is currency for trade with heaven.

He stands quietly in the shadows, recognizes with an honest and brief prayer. Needs God's love. Needs God's forgiveness.

And these are the things which may become for him the wellsprings of his own love, his own forgiveness, his own mercy.

A goodness that embraces other people. A goodness that delights to see them praying. goodness envisaged in the gospel of Jesus.

[24 : 25] Jesus, of course, looked for goodness to be spread through mercy, not to be attained by suppressing or excluding other people. Jesus looked for goodness to be gained by transformation of the unclean rather than by rejection of the unclean.

Jesus looked for goodness to be attained not so much by people paying attention to the commandment be holy, Pharisees and the Essenes thought, but by paying attention to the more fundamental commandments, love God and your neighbor, including your enemy.

Story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, good people. parable about what counts as good. Parable about where we place our trust.

Parable about what sort of community we are, how far we are open to embracing the outsider, the marginalized. Those who have ears, let them hear.

truly all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, never enter it.

[25 : 59] Let us learn humility and let us pray that somehow go on from there to learn to love. enough to another save the f the ang left of the