



# Preach **Luke** sermon

## Last Sunday after Trinity 28<sup>th</sup> October 2007

### RELATED

Jer 14:7-10, 19-end  
Psalm 84:1-7  
2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18

### CONTINUOUS

Joel 2:23-end  
Psalm 65, or 65:1-7  
2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18

## Luke 18:9-14 (NIV) The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The 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. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"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.'

"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."

Freedom fighter, or terrorist; champion of the poor, or meddling do-gooder; little angel, or anti-social vandal. How we see people depends on our point of view. If we have never met the person, our opinion will be influenced by what we have heard, or have read about them. When, as a young man, Nelson Mandela was arrested and imprisoned in South Africa, there were many in that country who only knew him as an anti-government activist. In modern terms he may even have been considered a terrorist. However history has revealed a different story; when Nelson Mandela emerged from prison, he became one of the most significant forces not just for peace, but for forgiveness and reconciliation during South Africa's difficult political transition from apartheid. But how would we have known the good Nelson Mandela did if no-one had told us? If the media had not informed us?

It is clear that the media can be a very powerful force. How events are reported and individuals are presented influences our opinions, whether we realise it or not. We eagerly read about the latest antics of the current 'A' and 'B' list celebrities in our newspapers and 'gossip' magazines. From the photographs we see and the stories that are written, we build up our own picture of who these celebrities are.

We may consider some of the people we read about to be our heroes and want to imitate them. In order to do this we may compare ourselves with the image we see. Wear what they wear, do what they do and think what they reportedly think. Let's face it; this is exactly why celebrity endorsements are so valuable. We may even have our own set of rules to ensure we stay within the image we desire to portray. Of



course depending on whom we are aiming to emulate this may, or may not, be a good thing.

When we look at Jesus' parable about a Pharisee and a Tax Collector praying in the temple, we are likely to automatically bring along our modern stereotypes of who these men were. In particular the Pharisee: hypocritical and petty to the extreme, caring little for people and their problems. However, in reality they were, at the time, a highly respected group within Jewish society.

The Pharisees were probably the largest major group within Judaism (roughly 1% of the Jewish population), but they had little political power. They were wholly committed to following the Law of Moses and they were very focused on the practicalities of keeping within that Mosaic Law. This entailed creating an additional sub-set of rules and laws that would help protect them from breaking even the smallest letter of the Law. They would meet in small groups each Friday night, the start of the Jewish Sabbath, to study the Scriptures and pray.

The Pharisees cared deeply for the Law of Moses and the traditions that had been verbally passed on from the time of Moses, especially those that dealt with ritual purity and tithing. The members of the pharisaic movement carefully lived within these rules and traditions, keeping to the highest moral ideas. So why did Jesus denounce them?

Sadly, it appears that the Law itself had become more important than the reason for it. That is, to help us know and follow God's will and to aid our worship of Him. Being seen to keep the rules was everything. The Gospels tell us that the Pharisees focused on a person's external actions, their ritual

purity. What they did, rather than who they were and why they did it. Thus a sense of pride in their keeping of the Law fostered and grew, regardless of how idiosyncratic it was. In the end it appears that the Pharisees did not need God, or His grace, for they had the Law! The rules had risen in importance so much as to become their God and this was at the root of Jesus' denouncement.

Turning to the Tax Collector, what would the people listening to Jesus' story have thought of him? Certainly some would have considered him no better than a thief, stealing from the Jews to give to the Romans. Generally speaking, each Tax Collector applied their own tax rate which was above the standard Roman tax rate. The difference between what they were able to collect and what the Romans wanted was then the Tax Collector's income. Because of this the Tax Collector of Jesus' parable would have certainly been despised; at best he would have been ignored or looked down upon; Tax Collectors were not popular. Put bluntly, they were considered collaborators; agents of the hated occupying power, the Romans. But Jesus, once again, turns everything on its head and challenges the opinions and prejudices of His audience. In a similar way as He does in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus makes the hated and despised character; the Samaritan, the hero.

On the face of it, the Pharisee in Jesus' parable had done nothing wrong, according to the Law. In fact he had gone beyond the requirements of the Law in also tithing his herbs. Unfortunately his attitude appears to be 'look at me and how wonderful I am', in short God should be grateful for the worship He is given! On the other hand, the Tax Collector had no such spiritual pretensions, simply recognising his own sinfulness and looking to God. To love and to





worship is a part of human nature and it is important that we, in our worship, look to God.

God's grace is freely given, we should let it fill our hearts and share it just as freely. The Pharisee, as good as he was, was looking sideways. He was comparing himself with those around him and feeling proud about how much better he was than everyone else. God didn't really feature in the Pharisee's thinking. In one sense, the Pharisee was his own hero. The Tax Collector on the other hand would have known he was despised and hated. He knew he did things wrong and did not follow all of God's Law. In his prayer, he focused on God and simply, penitently, sought God's mercy.

So, what can we take home from this parable today? Well because everyone is different, there are different things to highlight to different people.

Firstly, to those in leadership: we should not get so wrapped up in what we do for the church that we lose sight of the God we worship. We mustn't be limited by human standards and rules, and think that is enough. On a regular basis, we need to prayerfully look at all our lives then realistically and joyfully give back to God.

Next, to those of us in the planned giving scheme: we need to look closely and prayerfully at the proportion of our lives we currently give back to God – and yes that does, although not exclusively, include money. We shouldn't use percentages as an excuse to limit what we give, but use them as a measure of how far we have travelled in our personal faith journeys. It can be uncomfortable to realise that what we do with the money God has given us, reflects something of what is in our hearts.

To those who have not made a regular financial commitment to this church, I would like to say this. It is not necessarily how much time and money you give that matters, rather it is what is in your heart when you give. All that you enjoy and need comes from God; why not consider making a commitment to give back to Him each week, every week. Joining the planned giving scheme can help you do this. To give is a privilege, not a chore.

Everyone is different, so do not try to be like the person sitting next to you, across from you, or even me (however saintly we may look). Rather, let's look to Jesus, make Him our hero and be like Him; inclusive, loving, and sacrificial.

Amen

