

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 18:9-17

Sermon: "Our "I" World"

The Gospel Lesson for this day is the familiar story about the tax collector and the Pharisee. As usual Jesus uses a colorful juxtaposition to gain our attention. A tax collector, hated by many, reviled by most, and the so-called religious Pharisee. It is easy to visualize the scene. The Pharisee looks very religious. He wears religious garments. He sounds religious. He does religious things. He feels entitled to special treatment because of his religious position in his society. He may even believe that God smiles upon him for being such a religious person. We've all met people like that even know some pastors that fit this mold.

The other guy, the tax collector, could be wearing the very latest fashion and it would not make one bit of difference in the way people looked at him. No matter how hard he tries, he is not going to be well respected in the community.

The obvious thing about this reading is that both men pray. The difference is in the way they pray. One prays filled with pride and spirit. However, that spirit and pride is in himself! The other prays with a sense of humility. When you look at this reading you get a real sense that the tax collector is fully aware of his status, not only to the general public, but more importantly, to his standing before God.

One of the primary ways that Jesus taught his disciples was to speak to them in parables. He was able to help them better understand day-to-day living through the use of these colorful stories.

Neatly woven within these stories were the fundamentals of life that we all live with each day. Jesus, however, was able to weave these tales in a way that touched each life then, and touches each life today. When we listen today with ears of faith, we are likely to find our own life within the life of the parable told by Jesus to his disciples so long ago. One theme that often finds its way into these stories is that there have always been those who place themselves on a higher level than the rest of us, even on a higher level than God!

In many ways, the ancient Pharisee was a religious icon. As a group, the Pharisees held sway over a great many people and institutions. Then, and now, we must always be careful about who we put on a pedestal, because it is likely they will fall from grace when the going gets tough.

And, in a direct parallel to our world today, the Pharisee stands in opposition to anyone who does not follow the party line. They were in our common language today, fundamentalists. There was no room for any interpretation of the law, unless by the scribes and that interpretation needed to meet with the approval of the Pharisees. Although they, like later Christians, believed in the resurrection of the dead, the similarities pretty much end at that point of agreement.

Much like strong religious figures of our own time, the Pharisees and their scribes enjoyed a good deal of popular support. In one way, this is surprising, since the Pharisees kept pretty much to themselves. They always seemed to be ready to criticize others for not keeping the laws, and they often looked down on those who showed no interest in God's Law.

Pharisees observed the law carefully as far as appearances went, but their hearts were suspect. Their motives were questionable because they often wanted to heap praise upon themselves, or at the very least have the appearance of holiness to all who would pay attention.

The Pharisees very much mirror some of the stronger political and religious figures of our own time. They had the kind of power that the Christian church once had in America. Their voices were heard as authoritative, and what they said had great influence within the society of that time. We see the same kind of power exhibited by religious figures in the Middle East today.

One look at the news tells us that the modern-day Pharisees can incite violence or peace by a mere word. They can, and often do, use their positions for political and monetary gain.

History tells us that the power of God in the hands of the self-centered was dangerous then, and it is today.

People often raise questions about religious institutions. Why do denominations exist? There are, of course, many answers to such a question, but one clear answer is summed up in one-word SIN but some say "accountability." Without accountability we run the risk of becoming corrupt by our own sense of pride or arrogance.

It really should not be surprising to any person living in today's world that so many people believe that the only person they can trust is themselves. The Bible tells us to trust God, but somehow we manage to find flaws in that logic. When people heap praise only on themselves and do not recognize the activity of God in their lives, they become full of themselves to the point of being a danger to themselves and those around them.

Our forgiveness and salvation comes through faith and trust in God and this leaves power-hungry people anxious and misguided.

Self-righteous people, like the Pharisees in our parable, are likely to attack our character if we question what they say. Some within the Pharisaic community believed they were so holy that they felt they would become infected by the presence of others. Most people, if they take the time to think about it, will discover that those people that are righteous (in themselves) do not live by the Word of God, nor do they feel that they need it. These people have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God, but have rewritten God's laws of righteousness to fit their own lifestyles.

Our world today glorifies those that proudly justify themselves. We watch television shows that are geared to the success and riches that people have acquired by their own devices. We even enjoy watching some of the rich and famous as they fall from grace because it seems to us that they probably deserve whatever bad thing is happening to them. And why do we enjoy watching such a thing?

We enjoy it because whether we admit it or not, we want what they have. If we can't have it, we enjoy watching them pay a high personal price for success. It is funny, many reach for the stars without ever giving serious consideration to who created the stars and put them in their place. The success of advertising campaigns that promote, youth, money, sex, and success point to a very basic problem in our world.

There is nothing wrong with being attractive, youthful, or rich.

There is something terribly wrong when those attributes are used to the detriment of others.

The problem for people who lift themselves above the God that created them is that they place themselves in a no-win situation. The Bible for them becomes a book full of nice stories and wise tales that tells about a time long, long ago. Nothing more, nothing less.

Let's take this a little further. If you take a close look at biblical history, you will find that there were at least three different kinds of Pharisees.

There were what we can call the Cultural Pharisees: those that just couldn't stand others because the others didn't look as good as they think they looked.

There were the Societal Pharisees: those that looked down their noses and the only time they would help someone is when recognition was bestowed upon them, making them look superior to the one receiving the help.

Then there were the Intellectual Pharisees: those that thought they knew everything, and that no other person could add anything to their knowledge that would increase their own intellectual ability. Now, before we get all comfortable, thinking that we do not fall into any of these categories, let's ask ourselves:

- Do we like the ability to correct others?
- Do we enjoy putting ourselves in a position of superiority over others?
- Do we often see the wrong in others, but not in ourselves?
- Do we feel that we have to fix others (even if they do not think they need fixing) just because we can?

- Do we feel that we are closer to God than anyone else?
- Do we pray to glorify God, or do we pray to glorify ourselves?
- Do we want recognition for everything that we do?
- Do we have a tendency to criticize others, no matter what the situation?

The good news is for us Pharisees, Tax Collectors and other types of sinners we have been redeemed in Christ. This is indeed good news!

Amen