

Romans 3:23-28 Luke 18:9-14

Once again, we have a short story told by Jesus that packs a mighty punch and contains several layers in terms of message and meaning. Firstly, let's have a look at the two main protagonists. *'Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector.'* Luke 18:10. On the one hand, we have the Pharisee. It is interesting that the term 'Pharisee' has become a derogatory term, virtually synonymous with 'religious hypocrite.' But that was hardly the case in first-century Judea. In fact, the Pharisees represented the pinnacle of Judaism. They were deeply religious, committed to religious tradition. They cared deeply about spiritual matters and were looked up to. So why was Jesus opposed to them? Why did he go out of his way to criticise them?

Simply because their fundamental religious beliefs opposed the grace of God as embodied in the person of Jesus. Simply because their preoccupation with rules and regulations opposed the emphasis on the love of God as preached and practised by Jesus. The unfortunate upshot of this is that they viewed themselves as being the standard bearers of all that was right and proper in terms of religious practice and belief; they considered themselves as being a cut above the general populace, which in turn led to an attitude of haughty privilege.

There is no doubt that this attitude is reflected in the Pharisee of this parable. *'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people – cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector!'* Luke 18:11. In contrast, we have the character of the tax collector. His reputation was in stark contrast to that of the Pharisee. Tax collectors worked for the Romans and had a well-deserved reputation for dishonesty. They were shunned by the more respectable members of society. Whether this particular man deserved this reputation is not stated, but that's not really the issue. Jesus is making a point by using two characters with two very opposing reputations.

Now which character in this story comes away with his reputation enhanced? As is so often the case, Jesus flips our preconceived ideas on their head. It is not the widely respected Pharisee but the despised tax collector. Why? Because of one thing – humility.

Yes, the tax collector is a sinner but the thing is, he recognises this, he acknowledges this, and herein lies the nub of this story. Everything about the tax collector conveys a sense of genuine grief and repentance. He stands at a distance, supposedly as far away as possible from the Holy Place. He is unable to look God in the eye, keeping his head bowed. He beats himself on the chest, a well-known gesture of grief and sorrow. *'But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner."*' Luke 18:13.

This is all in stark contrast to the Pharisee who not only declared his abstaining from sin, he compares himself favourably with the tax collector, claiming his superiority. But who returns justified before God? Not the respected Pharisee but the despised tax collector. *'I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God.'* Luke 18:14. 'Justified' is one of the great Biblical words. It means 'made righteous'. So Jesus tells us that not only is the tax collector forgiven by God, he has enhanced his relationship with God. Through his repentance, which has been brought about by his humility, he has drawn closer to God.

Herein lies the great promise of the New Testament – if we acknowledge our failings and shortcomings and are able to put ourselves in Christ's hands, not only are we forgiven but we are empowered to lead productive and meaningful lives. I quote from our first reading: *'For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.'* Romans 3:23-24. I find this to be one of the most comforting passages in the Bible.

The point is this, it takes humility to recognise and acknowledge that we have failings and we make mistakes. Humility is such a powerful thing. Not only does humility give a person mana, without humility I don't believe we can have a close and meaningful relationship with God. After all, it takes humility to recognise that we need God and that we need to put ourselves in his hands. C S Lewis said, *'As long as you are proud, you cannot know God.'*

Just a note on the side here. The reason why we have the Confession and Absolution early on in our service of worship is that in terms of relationship with God, the slate is cleaned, so to speak, and so we are in a good space to come before him in worship; it clears the way for us to draw closer to God and come to know God.

One of the wonderful qualities that shines through when you read about the great Billy Graham is his humility. He never saw himself as anyone special and yet he impacted on the lives of millions of people. He saw himself as a sinner. I guess we are all sinners but in comparative terms, if he was a sinner, I am not sure what that makes me! But then, it was largely due to his humility that he had such a close relationship with God, and was so universally respected and admired.

There is no doubt that a truly humble man is hard to find, yet humility will inevitably bring its reward, and that can be either tangible or intangible. There is the true story of Booker T Washington, the renowned black educator. Shortly after he took over the presidency of the Tusgee Institute, an historically black university in Alabama, he was walking in an exclusive suburb of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. This was in the 60s when racism was deeply embedded in American society. Not sure that things have drastically changed!

Not knowing the famous Mr Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping firewood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he had finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A young girl recognised him and later revealed his identity to the lady.

The next morning, the embarrassed woman went to see Mr Washington in his office at the Institute and apologised profusely. 'It's perfectly all right, madam,' he replied. 'Occasionally, I enjoy a little manual labour. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for someone.' She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his humble and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tusgee Institute.

Moral of the story – humility brings blessings. I would like to finish with this rather delightful quote from M R DeHann, American Bible teacher: *'Humility is something we should constantly pray for, yet never give thanks to God for.'*