

## THE GIFT OF JUSTIFICATION

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Grace Church in New York  
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Jesus said, *“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”* (Luke 18:14)

Sometime ago I heard the story of a man who attended his 30-year high school reunion. In all those years hadn't been back, so he was eager to go, reconnect with old friends, and take stock of how he was doing in comparison with his classmates. Who was successful, and who wasn't? Who had kept his hair, and who hadn't? Who maintained her figure, and who didn't? Who was happy, and who wasn't?

Over drinks and dinner one night the man and his friends remembered their exploits, including one period that involved some fairly relentless bullying of another classmate. The bullied classmate had eventually left the school before graduation. No one knew what became of him, and he certainly wasn't in attendance at the reunion. “It was just kid's stuff,” said one friend after another drink. “Kids can be awful to each other,” he added. But with new clarity the man remembered that it was far more than child's play. In fact, he'd been a ringleader in making another person's life a living hell. Day after day, when the dismissal bell rang, they would rush to the boy's locker, catch him there, and pummel him with insults and fists. All these years later the man was grieved to recall what he did. Why did he do it? He'd been popular enough. But some perceived inadequacy had driven him then, and drove him still to derive satisfaction by outdoing any and all competitors against which he could measure himself. He could see it now, but was no excuse. It was no justification.

The man left the reunion determined to repent, to make amends, to apologize. But how would he do it? Once back home he tried to discover whatever became of the bullied student, but he could find no trace of him, not even on the internet. Was he even still living at all? The man was anguished by what he might have unleashed. It could be that not even a lifetime of good deeds will erase the effects of what he had done.

Forgive me such a truly glum beginning to the sermon. If you weren't depressed before you arrived here, you surely are now! You came to church for a bit of good news and right from the start I hit with guilt and despair. It's just that I recalled the story of the man and his high school reunion when I began to think about today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus told a parable commonly called “The Pharisee and the Publican,” or, “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector.” Through the parable he means to convey a gift to you and me and anyone else who has fallen short of the glory of God. The gift goes by many names. Various artists and poets have struggled to express it, to define it. St. John called it *power to become a child of God*. The gift is justification. It is forgiveness, righteousness. It is being made worthy to stand before God. It is peace with God. It is knowing that nothing in all of creation can separate you from the love of God. The Psalmist (84) tried to describe the experience as dwelling in the house of the Lord. *Happy are they who dwell in your house; they will always be praising you! For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room, and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.* The Psalmist (15) also asked: *Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle; who may abide upon your holy hill?*

So, in today's parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, who gets to move into the house of the Lord and dwell there? You know the story. In fact, you've probably heard it so many times that it doesn't surprise you anymore to hear that the tax collector goes home to his house justified. We hear of this humble man, sobbing in a corner of the Temple, not even lifting his eyes to pray, and we conclude that of course he goes home justified. God has a preference for such downtrodden people, and a penchant for lifting up the lowly. But the tax collector doesn't fit the stereotype. You see, outside the Temple precincts, it's the tax collector who is the bully. In the time and place of Jesus, tax collectors were especially vile characters. A drug lord might be a modern-day equivalent. Tax collectors worked for the Romans who occupied the land. The Jews hated paying taxes to the foreign infidel, and thus they considered those who collected the taxes to be contemptible collaborators with the enemy. They were traitors. Most tax collectors fully deserved their reputation. They were corrupt in their dealings, and lined their pockets by cheating their own people. Tax collectors normally would never go to the Temple to pray. But this one? After a quick little prayer, he goes down to his house justified. He stands worthy before God. To borrow the imagery of the Psalmist, he takes up residence in the house of the Lord.

The other man praying in the Temple is a Pharisee. Those of you who have read the Bible and listened to a sermon or two instinctively will want to boo and hiss when you hear the word Pharisee. Two-thousand years' of sermons have trashed the Pharisees as buttoned-up, conservative religious bureaucrats who practiced the fine art of controlling people, and knew nothing of true spirituality. But in truth, most people regarded the Pharisees as good, respectable men, deeply committed to living the Law of Moses. They worked laboriously to keep the faith, to fight the good fight with all their might, to finish the race. As such they represented the epitome of Judaism.

So it is that the Pharisee in today's parable goes to the Temple and prays his well-known prayer. He thanks God that he isn't like other people – especially not a bully and a brute like the tax collector over there. The Pharisee is not a thief, not a rogue, not an adulterer. He fasts twice a week. Then hear this: he tithes. He gives ten-percent of his income, right off the top, to the Temple. We are one week away from Pledge Sunday, and let me tell you: any priest overhearing the Pharisee's prayer would have been happy to receive a pledge card from this one. Nevertheless, this one goes home not justified, unrighteous, and unworthy to stand before God. Does he get to dwell in the house of the Lord? Forget it! It is off to the tents of the wicked for him.

The Pharisee would be the first to cry foul, and we would agree with him. Those of you who follow sports know that a relatively new practice allows a team to call for a video review of a play if they don't like the umpire's call. Sometimes the ruling on the field stands; yes, the runner beat the throw, the receiver did indeed put both feet down in the end zone before going out of bounds. Other times the ruling of the field is overturned; no, the runner did not beat the tag; the receiver did not have possession before going down, meaning the pass was incomplete. Likewise, we would like to call for a video review of the judgement in this parable. The tax collector should not be safe; he's out! The Pharisee not only caught the ball, but took meticulous care to make sure his feet were in bounds. Touchdown! The Pharisee should win. The video review will overturn the ruling on the field. It's an injustice to call it any other way.

Last spring I had a glimpse of the painstaking process of justice. I was called for jury duty and was almost seated for one the GS9 Bobby Schmurda gang-related trials. The defendants, Alex Crandon and Rashid Derrisant, stood accused of conspiracy, murder, attempted murder, assault, and a slew of other crimes. I was relieved not to be chosen because the trial was to take six weeks and run through Holy Week and Easter. In the end, the jury found them both guilty. The judge sentenced Crandon to 53 years, Derrisant to 98 1/3 years, and this week Schmurda himself on a plea bargain to 7 years. The wheels of justice turn slowly, and any justification for these three –

any rehabilitation of these three – will be decades in the making. You can't just put them back on the street. Chaos would be the result. When you just forgive people willy-nilly, chaos on the street is the result. So how can Jesus declare the tax collector justified? Imagine all the people he's defrauded, and the lives he's ruined. Who pays the price? Who eats the loss? Where does all the unforgiven, unaddressed sin go?

I've often thought that one of the great movies of all time is *Animal House*, starring John Belushi and Tim Matheson. The film is about the totally immoral and irresponsible residents of Delta House, a fraternity known for wreaking havoc on the stately campus of Faber College. Dean Wormer finally succeeds in expelling them all, but they won't go away – not without exacting a price. The final scene of the movie is the college parade, complete with marching bands and floats. For their contribution, the Delta House boys have turned their car into a giant wedding cake float, with large script on the side of it reading, "Eat Me." The float prowls around town, crashes through the parade, and eventually takes aim at the reviewing stand, where Dean Wormer and other dignitaries sit. Chaos is the result. You can accuse me a reading too much into the movie, and you'd probably be right. But I take the cake float smashing through town and destroying everything in its path to represent unresolved, unabsorbed sin and loss and grief spinning out of control and seeking a target. "Eat me," it says. Someone is going to have to eat the loss.

What the Christian faith says is that someone does. God in Christ eats the loss, absorbs the sin. In one of our Eucharistic Prayers we hear of Christ on the cross: *who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.* Somehow, the tax collector gets it. Some crisis of the soul, some shock of realization has driven this one to utter despair, and brought him into the house of God. There he stands off by himself, not even looking up, beating his breast, and declaring, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*" Likewise, the man who attended his high school reunion saw the full reality of the terror he caused the boy whom he bullied. In sorrow, and with nowhere else to turn, he threw himself on the mercy of Christ. He turned to Christ, trusting – hoping – that the Lamb of God truly can absorb and take away the sins of the world. "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*" For both of these people – one in a parable, the other who lives and breathes today – the process was like a dismantling of their old selves that allowed them to become poor enough in spirit to be blessed. They became small enough to fit through the door of the house of the Lord.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, is never going to get it. Prayer is supposed to be a window into God, but for him, it's not a window. It's a mirror in which he admires himself, and thus prays to himself. It's as if he prays, "*But enough about me, God, let's talk about you. What do you think of all my moral achievements? And wow! Look at the tax collector over there: compared to him, I'm a saint!*"

You see, the Pharisee needs the tax collector to look bad, so that he can look good. He needs the tax collector to be condemned so that he can think he's justified. He trusts in himself that he is righteous, and despising others is how he props up the delusion of his worthiness. It is why the other one, and not this one, goes down to his house justified. The Pharisee is too puffed up to fit through the door of the house of the Lord. *For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*