

The Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18
<i>Response</i>	The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 17-18, 19, 23
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[T]hat is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 18:9-14

The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C takes us to yet another of the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, and this one is another parable that's also unique to Luke's Gospel. It's the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector; a very well known story of Jesus. So let's look at it together in Luke 18:9-14, the Gospel for today. It says this:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

The first thing I want to highlight here is that Jesus, according to Luke, is giving this parable to those who are proud. So just as the parable of the Persistent Widow was for those who are losing heart in the midst of prayer, this parable is for people who are struggling with—or maybe not struggling with—the sin of pride. And you can see this when Luke says that “he told this parable to those who”: 1) “trusted in themselves that they were righteous”; and 2) “despised others”. Those are two essential elements of sinful pride according to the Bible.

It’s very important for us to define this precisely, because in contemporary English usage, when we talk about the word pride, it frequently has either a positive or a neutral value. So someone will talk about being, perhaps, proud to be an American or proud of their country—that actually describes the positive virtue of patriotism. Even more common, we’ll say, “I’m proud of my daughter” or “I’m proud of my son.” What that means is that I take delight in the good accomplishments of someone I love or someone I care about. That’s not what Luke or Jesus is going to refer to, or the New Testament will refer to, when it talks about sinful pride. The essence of sinful pride (as Luke’s describing it here) is self-trust and despising others, or self-righteousness and despising others. So the proud trust in themselves, and at the same time, they look down on other people. So I think the English word we would use for this is the arrogant. If I say someone is arrogant, you know what that means. It’s someone who exalts themselves and despises other people at the same time. And in this context, Jesus is specifically concerned with a kind of spiritual pride—people who trust that they are righteous, whereas other people are wicked.

So He’s telling this parable specifically to those who are self-righteous or arrogant. So that’s the preface that Luke is giving us to who the parable’s aimed at. Alright, second point: the parable revolves around these two figures of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Now as soon as we encounter this parable, we come up against a problem of understanding it or hearing it the way the first Jewish listeners of Jesus would have heard it. And the problem is the result of the fact that for many contemporary readers of the New Testament, most contemporary Gentile readers of the New Testament, our only experience of a Pharisee are in the Gospels where the Pharisees are often depicted as the opponents of Jesus, right?

So the classic example here is Jesus' famous diatribe against the Pharisees in Matthew 23, where he calls them whitewashed tombs and hypocrites, and a whole list of epithets that are really very harsh. So when we hear the word Pharisee, we tend to give it a negative definition of someone who is a hypocrite or who is self-righteous, for example. But in a first-century Jewish setting, it's very important to recognize that that was not the connotation that the word Pharisee had. Technically speaking, the definition of Pharisee is "the separated ones"—*perushim* in Hebrew. But as Josephus, a first-century Jewish writer, tells us, of all the various Jewish sects in the first century AD—the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Esseens, the Zealots, the different groups—the Pharisees were actually widely respected among the common Jewish people as not just being separated in the sense of being separated from sin, but actually separated for God. They were viewed as very holy and very righteous and actually striving to be faithful to the law. In other words, they were widely respected as saintly or holy.

Let me give you an example of this from Josephus. In his book the *Antiquities*, book 18, Josephus writes:

[The Pharisees] are, as a matter of fact, extremely influential among the townsfolk; and all prayers and sacred rites of divine worship are performed according to their exposition. This is the great tribute that the inhabitants of the cities, by practicing the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their discourse, have paid to the excellence of the Pharisees.²

So notice what Josephus is saying there, that amongst the townsfolk, amongst the common people, the group of Jewish leaders that was respected as living a life of excellence and fidelity to the law were the Pharisees. The reason that's important to understand is because in the parable, Jesus is setting up a contrast between a Pharisee and a tax collector. Now we've talked about tax collectors in other videos—*telónés* in Greek. If you recall, the tax collectors (within a first century Jewish context) were widely despised by the common people and are frequently grouped by Jesus with sinners—in other words, Jewish people who are publicly and flagrantly violating the law, so that they are seen as in a constant state of grave sin,

² Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.15; trans. L. H. Feldman, LCL

like someone who would commit adultery publicly (like Herod and his wife) or a prostitute. These would be considered sinners.

So in order to grasp Jesus' parable rightly, what you need to realize is that from a first century Jewish perspective, in terms of just initial prejudices, the Pharisee would be the good guy and the tax collector would be the bad guy, right? That's how you would think of them. The Pharisee is the one who is faithful to the law, who is respected for the excellence of his way of life (as Josephus described it), whereas the tax collector is one who is despised for living a life of breaking the commandments, colluding with the Roman empire, fraternizing with the pagan overlords of the Jewish people...and so on and so forth.

So I just want to set the stage there, because otherwise you're not going to feel the force of the parable, because as always—or almost always—there's a twist here involved. Jesus does something unexpected. If you were a first century Jewish listener and you hear a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector, your initial expectation is that the Pharisee would be a righteous follower of the law, and that the tax collector would be a public violator of the law...and Jesus flips that on its head in this parable, when He says, "Two men went up into the temple to pray"—one's a Pharisee and the other is a tax collector. And you're thinking, okay, I know how this is going to go. The Pharisee is going to be good and the tax collector's going to be bad. Errr, wrong. That's not it. Here's the twist—it comes out the other way.

The Pharisee, Jesus says, stood and prayed, "God, I thank thee I'm not like other people who are extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." You can hear the loathing in his voice. You can hear the kind of arrogance as he sets himself up over against this tax collector. Why is he so righteous? Well, he fasts twice a week. He pays tithes on, not just on some of his products and produce and money, but all of it. Whereas the tax collector, Jesus says, staring far off, wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Now here's the key twist. When Jesus says, "I tell you this man"—meaning the tax collector— "went down to his house justified rather than the other," that's where

he flips expectations on their head. Whoa, whoa, whoa....wait. The tax collector's justified, whereas the Pharisee isn't? Why? Well, Jesus gives us the answer in the *nimshal* of the parable, the upshot. "Everyone who exalts himself is humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Okay, so what's going on here?

Essentially, what Jesus is doing is He's telling a story about two different kinds of prayer in order to illustrate what happens when we are spiritually prideful and what happens when we are spiritually humble. And you can see that there's a remarkable kind of contrast between the Pharisee's prayer and the tax collector's prayer. So I've kind of broken these down into a few key points—so just walk with me through it together.

On one hand, the Pharisee is close. Notice, he's in the temple, and it's implied that he's standing right there in the outer court where Israelite men were able to go and pray to God. So he's not afraid to get close to God's presence, whereas the tax collector—by contrast—is far away. He's standing at the rear. Notice it says he's far off. This would probably be in the rear of the outer court of the temple. So this is like the difference between the people who sit in the front pew in church and then the people who sit in the back row — although I think in a previous video I mentioned that we sit on the front row. But we do that so that my kids can pay attention, so hopefully it's not a result of spiritual pride. In any case, notice, the context is that they're in the temple, and there's already kind of a difference between them of locale. The Pharisee's close, the tax collector's far off.

Second, the Pharisee is proud because he sees himself as already righteous, whereas the tax collector is humble, beating his breast, which is a standard Jewish sign of repentance from sin. The idea of beating the breast is "I'm guilty for doing what I've done. I'm guilty for breaking the law. I've sinned against the Lord."

Number three, whereas the Pharisee judges others, notice, where's his focus? It's on all the other people. Look at these extortioners and these unjust people, adulterers. Look at this tax collector." He's focused on other people. By contrast, what does the tax collector focus on in his prayer? Himself. What does he say? "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He's not paying attention to others. He's focused on his own sinfulness, his own need of mercy, his own need of redemption.

Fourth, and this is really, really fascinating. It has to do with the essence of the prayer. Although the Revised Standard Version says that the Pharisee stood and prayed with himself, the literal Greek here is actually *pros heauton*. So it's literally "he prayed to himself," whereas the tax collector prays to God. Now we can do a whole video just on that. There is so much so much profundity here in what Jesus is saying, because think about it, if the Pharisee is praying to himself, then who is his god? Well, himself, which is the essence of pride—the sin of pride. Because what the sin of pride is, it's a disordered self-love in which a person sets themselves up in the place of God. And that's what's going on with the Pharisee's prayer. He's talking to himself, because in essence, he's made himself into his own god. Whereas the virtue of humility, by contrast—which you see in the tax collector—is recognizing that God is God and I am not, recognizing my nothingness, my loneliness. Humble comes from the word for dirt, recognizing that I'm dust in the wind. I'm weak, I'm small, I'm a creature; I'm not the creator.

So it's just very powerful because if you've ever paid attention to your own prayer, your own interior life, whenever you're praying, maybe—whatever it is—maybe you're at Mass. Where is your focus? Are you like the tax collector and focused on God and on your own sinfulness? Or are you like the Pharisee, focused on everyone around you, focused on, you know, whatever they're wearing or whatever they may have done—you might know people in the congregation. What are they doing here? What right do they have to be here? Are you focused on them and talking to yourself? Praying to yourself? Or are you focused on God? Very powerful illustration here. "He prayed to himself." That's the essence of idolatry—to make oneself God and to take God off the throne.

So what's the result? The final contrast—this is really striking. Remember, in a first century Jewish setting, you would go to the temple to pray, but also to offer sacrifice in atonement for sin. So the term here of being justified, that Jesus used—He doesn't talk about justification very often. That's something we tend to associate with St. Paul—justification by faith apart from works of the law. Being made righteous through faith and not by circumcision and the various works of the law...keeping the law. So when a Jew would refer to themselves as *dikaios* or righteous, it would mean that you were in right standing with God. That you were faithful to the commandments, but also too if you went to the temple, if you had

committed some sin, you would offer a sacrifice of atonement to put yourself back into a state of communion with God or state of righteousness or justification. Well in this case, notice what Jesus says. Contrary to what you might expect, the tax collector leaves the temple justified—or made righteous or declared righteous—whereas the Pharisee is not. Why? He gives the answer: because everyone who exalts himself (like the Pharisee) will be humbled, whereas he who humbles himself (like the tax collector) will be exalted.

So in this case, the *nimshal* itself turns the tables—exactly what you would not expect to be the outcome of a Pharisee and a tax collector going up to the temple is what happens. And the key difference revolves around whether they were prideful or whether they were humble, whether they exalted themselves or whether they humbled themselves before God.

So in fact—just to be clear here too—when Jesus uses the word “exalt”, the Greek *hypsōō* literally means to lift yourself up, and then *tapeinoō*—to humble yourself—means to bring yourself down. So what the Pharisee is doing is he’s lifting himself up as if he’s God, whereas the tax collector is bringing himself down in humility. So that’s the contrast between these two. Very powerful parable on the sin of pride, the necessity of humility, and the manner of our prayer. How do we pray whenever we pray? Are we like the Pharisee or are we like the tax collector?

With that said, let’s go back to the Old Testament reading. The Old Testament reading for today is from the book of Sirach 35. It’s one of those Old Testament books that’s only found in the Catholic Bible, and a beautiful, beautiful book. And it’s got a lot about virtues and vices—that’s what Sirach is very much focused on. And in Sirach 35:12-14 and 16-18, the theme or the focus of the text is on prayer—surprise—and humility. So what kind of prayer does God listen to? He listens to humble prayer. Sirach 35:12 says this:

for the Lord is the judge,
and with him is no partiality.
He will not show partiality in the case of a poor man;
and he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.
He will not ignore the supplication of the fatherless,

nor the widow when she pours out her story.
He whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted,
and his prayer will reach to the clouds.
The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds,
and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord;
he will not desist until the Most High visits him,
and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment.
And the Lord will not delay,
neither will he be patient with them...

Okay, so notice here, the heart (really) of this Old Testament passage is verse 17: "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds." So what Sirach is revealing to us is that there's a certain power, a certain efficacy in humble prayer, and that when a humble person prays in humility, God's not going to delay in answering that prayer. He's going to do justice, he's going to bring justice and execute his judgment.

So the context in Sirach appears to be the poor and the dispossessed, like a widow or an orphan, someone like that in humility crying out to God for justice, that their prayer will be heard. But it lays out a basic principle that is the parallel...that sets up a parallel or link between the Old Testament reading and the New Testament reading for today. If you want your prayers to be heard, then don't pray in a spirit of self-exaltation, pray in a spirit of humility.

And that's of course the theme of the psalm as well. So if you look at Psalm 34 for today, the refrain, "The Lord hears the cry of the poor" (NAB) —beautiful passage, so, you can never hear this one enough, Psalm 34:17:

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,
and delivers them out of all their troubles.
The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.
Many are the afflictions of the righteous;
but the Lord delivers him out of them all. (Psalm 34:17-19)

Beautiful passage there. So if you're feeling brokenhearted, what does Scripture say to you? The Lord is near to you in that brokenheartedness. Because, and often times, let's be honest, God will allow our hearts to get broken precisely in order—it sounds bad—but to bring us down. In other words, to help us grow in self-knowledge and realize our weakness and our need for God. That's kind of the essence of the humility there, that in our lowliness, we cry out to God and need Him, and cry out for his help, and that humility is like the doorway to His grace. It enables Him to come and to bear us up and to deliver us out of our troubles.

So alright, in closing, then, what can we take away from this passage for today? I'd just like to end with one of my favorite paragraphs from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It's in part four of the *Catechism*; it's in the section on prayer. And it's right at the very beginning in paragraph 2559. The *Catechism* says this about the relationship between prayer and humility.

“Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.” But when we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or “out of the depths” of a humble and contrite heart? He who humbles himself will be exalted; humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer. “Man is a beggar before God.”³

The last quote there is from St. Augustine. So notice what the *Catechism* is saying: humility is the foundation of prayer. So if you build a house without a foundation, what's going to happen? It's just going to fall apart. So trying to pray in a spirit of pride or self-exaltation is going to end up with no prayer at all. It's completely ineffective. In order for prayer to be efficacious, in order for it to even really be prayer, it has to start with the foundation of humility. And as a rule, people who don't pray are proud. It's just the way it is. If you don't pray, what you're basically saying to God is, “I've got this. I don't need you.”

³ CCC 2559, citing St. John Damascene and St. Augustine

So if you get up in the morning and you start your day without prayer, what are you saying by means of that action? “I can take care of myself.” But if you begin your day with prayer—which all of the saints say we should—it’s a way of recognizing that every single day, “God, you are God; I am not. You’re the creator; I’m the creature. I need your help. I need your assistance. I humbly acknowledge that I don’t know how to pray as I ought”...and that enables me to receive freely the gift of prayer.

So this is one of the reasons why, as we close, I love the Liturgy of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist—the Penitential Rite, in particular, at the beginning of Mass. I’m sure you’ve noticed, when we begin the Mass with the Penitential Rite, and we say the longer form, notice one of the symbolic actions during the Penitential Rite is the *mea culpa*. “I confess to Almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned”—and what do we say?—“through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” And when we do that, we beat our breast three times.

Now in that action, there’s kind of a liturgical mystagogy, whereby I put myself in the place of the tax collector from the parable that Jesus just gave to us. So at the beginning of every Mass, when we say the Penitential Rite, the Church, in a sense, is instructing us, reminding us that as we come into the New Temple of the sanctuary of God in the liturgy, to take the posture not of the Pharisee who was self-exalted and prideful and despising of others, but to take the part of the tax collector...to pray like the tax collector. It’s my fault, it’s my fault, it’s my most grievous fault. God, be merciful to me, a sinner.