



The First United Methodist Church of LaGrange

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2022 • Eleven o'clock

Good morning and welcome to this classical celebration of the historic Christian faith in the Wesleyan Tradition!

TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE

We often hear the saying, "there are two kinds of people in the world..." According to author Alan Cohen, these two kinds of people are "those who make excuses and those who get results." Actress Marlo Thomas looks at this duality a bit differently. She explains that the two kinds of people are the givers and the takers. "**The takers may eat better**," she explains, "**but the givers sleep better.**" Woody Allen adds, "There are two types of people in this world: the good and the bad. The good sleep better, but the bad seem to enjoy the waking hours much more."

On the surface, our scripture lesson this morning seems to affirm this view that there are two kinds of people: those who are like the Pharisee and those who are like the tax collector.

Jesus begins by describing someone, who by all appearances, should be one of the most holy and devoted Jews around: a **Pharisee**. Pharisees were extremely devout and highly disciplined in their religious practices. A Pharisee was obedient to the **Law of Moses**, even going above and beyond what the Law required.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were considered traitors and cheats. They had sold out to the Romans who oppressed Israel, collecting the Roman tolls and padding their own pockets with whatever they wanted to charge over and above the required tax. And it was all legal! Jews considered the practice to be highly unethical and contrary to God's commands. If a Pharisee was at the top end of the righteousness ladder, a tax collector was on the very bottom rung.

The Pharisee goes to the temple to pray, feeling confident before God about himself and his own righteousness. He knows he is a really good Jew. In fact, he's much better at being Jewish than most other Jews, and his prayer reflects this awareness. The problem with the Pharisee is that he thinks his righteousness is securely grounded in his own actions and attitudes. He may be telling the truth about himself, but **his prayer misses the truth about God**.

In the tax collector's prayer, God is the subject, the doer, the one who shows mercy. The Pharisee made himself feel better by comparing himself to someone he considered to be less than he was. The tax collector also made a comparison, but it was not to another person. The tax collector compared himself to the holiness of God, and he recognized how far he was from matching that kind of righteousness.

The Pharisee saw himself as righteous because of what he did, but the tax collector saw himself as an unrighteous sinner, dependent upon what God does. **The tax collector knew his only chance of being made right before God was by the mercy of God.**

Both men addressed God directly in their prayers. Both men quoted psalms, the models for prayer that cover nearly every circumstance. Both men prayed about himself. But one put himself at the center of his prayer while the other put God and His mercy at the center.

At the end of the day, the Pharisee went home from the Temple the same way he came. He was righteous, in his own eyes and in the eyes of everyone who saw him. But, not before God. Nothing changed.

The tax collector experienced something different. He went home "justified"; that means "acquitted" and "made right before God." How did that happen? The tax collector made no sacrifice, no offering of restitution. Rather, his humble prayer, trusting God's mercy alone, made him right with God. The prayer did not change God; the prayer changed the tax collector.

Prayer does not change God; prayer changes us! How? Prayer helps to align our hearts with God's heart until His will is our highest goal and deepest desire.

Remember how much I love you ...
It's an honor to be your Senior Minister!


Dr. John Beyers

We're Better Together!