

Called Apart to Repentance, Luke 18:9-14

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Introduction

There have been times that I have preached where the comments back to me were along the lines of, “Thank you for your message. I wish certain people had heard it.” It is easy to deflect God’s Word away from ourselves, and to apply it only to others. But God’s Word is for all of us, including its preachers. The tax collector and the Pharisee is a case in point. Luke tells us that the parable was meant for all who are confident in their own righteousness and look down on others. But evangelicals deflect this parable. We pick up on the word “justified” at the end, and we discourse on the theology of justification by grace alone, and find that the parable was directed against the Pharisees as doers of works-righteousness, and we look down on doers of works righteousness, because OUR theology is RIGHT and THEIRS is WRONG.

This lands us back in the soup of “looking down on everyone else,” the very sin that Jesus is talking about. The Pharisee’s attitude is an example of one form this sin can take, but it takes many forms. We are called upon to discern this sin in any form and to repent of it. When we share in the repentance of the tax collector we come into solidarity with all people, for all have sinned and fallen short, and for all of us the only way to life is a broken and contrite heart.

Let us pray. Lord God, we thank you for your mercy shown to the us on the cross of Jesus Christ that has rescued us into your life. Help us to share your mercy with others who have not yet received that life, that they may also rejoice in their redemption. In Jesus’ name, amen.

1. The Sin of Superiority

Last month Saturday Night Live celebrated forty years on the air, and the event was a

cover story for *Rolling Stone* magazine and featured by other entertainment magazines. I stopped watching the show over twenty years ago, because even in its glory days over thirty years ago only about one-third of the skits were funny. Another third fell flat, and another third were tasteless and troubling. Right around the time that I stopped watching, was when Dana Carvey was on the cast, and he presented a character called “The Church Lady.” This was such a hit the first time around that the Church Lady segment became a feature of the show.

The Church Lady was everything that society criticizes about religiously-minded believers in Jesus, especially of the fundamentalist and evangelical variety, since those were the days that some fundamentalist groups had created a big tizzy about Satanic messages being recorded backwards on heavy-metal Rock and Roll records. The Church Lady was moralistic, she was a bigot, and she was paranoid, finding Satan everywhere. “Isn’t that special?”

She would end her segment with something that she called her “superiority dance,” in which she did a little jig as she celebrated her moral superiority and exclusive spiritual condition that made her different from other people who were headed straight to Hell. As the Church Lady would do this dance I would shake my head. Clearly, if the sketch-writers knew what they were talking about, they would know that as far as the Church Lady was concerned, dancing belonged with cards and alcohol as coming straight from the Devil.

The problem is that the segment worked, it was perceived as genuinely funny satire, and for satire to be funny there must be an element of recognition, the crowd as a whole and millions of viewers saw the Church Lady as depicting something that they have experienced. The lesson of Dana Carvey’s Church Lady is that too many people experienced a Christian like the Church Lady at some time in their lives; male or female, these goody-two-shoes Christians probably

seemed to be glorying in their own superior sense of self, in a childish way thinking that they were truly better than other people.

There are two sides to this coin. On the one side is that the darkness hates the light. People who would rather be sinning do not enjoy the company of the redeemed, and if those among the redeemed are bold to express their convictions from time-to-time, we will often come across as sounding like the Church Lady. Spiritual truths spoken with spiritual words are appreciated by spiritual minds; the flesh resists and hates and mocks the counsels of the Spirit.

On the other side of the coin we have all experienced times when self-styled born again Christians, perhaps even we ourselves, have shown bigotry instead of hospitality, meanness instead of kindness, legalism instead of grace, paranoia about evil instead of trust in God's care, concern for theological precision instead of compassion, complacency instead of energy in mission, and a zeal for politics instead of a zeal for evangelism. The world seizes upon that darkness and points accusing fingers and laughs Christians to scorn.

I say let the world hate us. It is going to anyway. But let the world hate us for the hospitality we show to the homeless, let the world hate us for the kindness we show to the single mother choosing to have her child while she tries to piece a life back together, let the world hate us for a mercy that triumphs over its zero-tolerance policies and three-strike laws and airport security lines, let the world hate us for our trust in God that banishes all fear of even the worst that the world can do to Christians – and the worst is being done to many Christians right now, in lawless regions of the Middle East – let the world hate us for crossing borders and boundaries and street-corners with a gospel of reconciliation that puts to death the hostilities and the partisanship and the cravings that the world cherishes.

As far as God is concerned our humility before Him and before the world means everything. If we show God and our world that we are smug, we are not justified. Either the Christian shows the world repentance and humility, or the Christian is not truly a Christian at all. The New Testament character of Paul is a great example of a Church-Lady type who was awakened to humility and repentance, and became an apostle. As an apostle he was more hated and despised in the world than ever, and he suffered a lot more than he did as a religious-type doing a superiority dance. But he was saved by grace, and he carried that gospel through the Roman World, planting a Church that continues to breathe the life of God wherever true Christians are found.

2. Justified

The tax collector, through his sorrow for sin, went down from the temple justified; he is the hero of the evangelical gospel of justification by grace alone. There are some things we need to understand about this tax collector: He belonged to the most privileged economic class in the Roman world. A tax collector was a contractor with the Empire. He was assigned a certain amount to collect, and anything above that was his profit. As you can imagine, most tax collectors had a reputation for being unscrupulous, for squeezing everything they could out of the working people.

During the last election cycle we heard criticisms and aspersions cast on the “one-percenters,” those who were able to get richer even during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, many of them prospering from golden parachutes, white collar crime and unethical business practices. The pundits and politicians were teaching us to look down on the one-percenters. Friends, this tax-collector is a one-percenter. This is no mild-mannered accountant cooking the books. His crimes included using Roman soldiers to brutally enforce his

own avarice, by robbing and confiscating under the guise of law. He is everything that our partisan politics is teaching the world to hate. To the Libertarians he represents the oppressive tax structure, to the conservatives he represents the overreach of an unbridled government, to the liberals he represents the oppressors who exploit the working people. Now then, can you love the tax collector as God loves him, or do you feel like you have the right to look down on such a person?

Yes, well, ahem, this is only a parable Jesus told to prove a point. The story of the Good Samaritan giving aid to his enemy was just a story told to prove a point. No one would REALLY do THAT, would they? And the lost son coming home to his father was just a story told to prove a point. No parent would REALLY forgive a son like that, would they? Is it not funny how all these stories seem to have the same point, about forgiving the unforgivable, loving the unlovable, and looking down on nobody? *But only God can do those things.* Yes Christian, and if you are a Christian, God has given you the Spirit of Christ to do *through you* what only God can do. That is the gospel.

In fact, the tax collector actually happened. Matthew, the author of a gospel, was a tax collector. Jesus called him to be a disciple, and he left his tax collecting office and joined him. Zaccheus, whom Jesus will meet in a short while, was a tax collector who repented when Jesus honored him by his visit. When you read the gospel of Matthew you read the testimony of a one-percenter who repented and followed Jesus. When you read the story of Zaccheus you find the testimony of a one-percenter who vowed to do what he could to make restitution to the people he wronged. This is the meaning of grace alone. No one's sin, now matter great, no matter how hated by the world, is too big or too much for God to forgive.

Addiction and the debaucheries that trail after it are not too much for God to forgive. White collar crime is not too much for God to forgive. Not even violence is too much for God to forgive. As the violence of an unjust conviction and execution was poured out on Jesus, he looked upon those crucifying him and said, “God, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” The World War Two concentration camp survivor Corrie Ten Boom found that Christ gave her the power to forgive her Nazi persecutors, though their violence took the life of her own sister.

This grace is not cheap. Grace is the product of the tough love of truth. When I was taking Confirmation Class my teacher, who was my Dad, told the story of a mobster who converted to Jesus Christ, started attending church, and then asked the pastor how he could become a more godly mobster. The answer is, of course, you cannot. Being forgiven your sins is the beginning, not the end, of your walk with Christ. The repentant person is confronted by the enormity of their sin, and weeps before God. This is the soul that is justified. And then that person in the power of God leaves behind certain professions, certain lifestyles. Christians cannot be strippers, cannot be flaunting contempt for God’s design for marriage and family, cannot be drug dealers and gangsters and bullies.

This might sound obvious, like it goes without saying, but it seems that these days everything is up for grabs, even in the churches. We want cheap grace, our sins freely forgiven, but with no power to change lives. The good news is that grace is free, and powerful, and effective. The story of the tax collector continued in the real lives of Matthew and Zaccheus, who left that profession behind and devoted themselves to bringing the gospel, the mercies, and the justice of God, to the world.

Conclusion

Repentance means sorrow for sin combined with an intention to live a new life in the Spirit and power of God, which is power to share the gospel as we are given opportunity. In this power we are indeed justified, and by his Spirit we can indeed be confident. No one would accuse the Apostle Paul of lacking confidence of his standing with God.

But confidence is not the same as superiority, arrogance, and smugness. The more grace you have received, the more humble you become and the more grace you desire to extend to others. Let the world misunderstand what our confidence means as Christians, and let the world hate us, but for the right reasons, not the wrong ones. Let us be bold in Christ, and show the strength of our faith in God by the humility and grace we show to everyone.