

Travel Stories: *The Sinners* - wk 10

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Sept. 20, 2020

Luke 18:9-14 *The Message paraphrase* (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

We're almost to the end of our message series looking at some of Jesus' conversations. These are the Travel Stories Jesus told while walking along and participating in the common things of life. As a main resource for this series, I've been drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*.

Every time Jesus tells a story the world gets larger for His listeners: our understanding deepens and our imaginations get energized. Storytelling invites this kind of participation. Jesus tells stories to get us involved in His way of living. He wants to get us active with the living God who is at work in the world. This is why Jesus tells stories, not to explain, but to get us actively involved in what God is up to in the homes, neighborhoods and work places where we spend our time.

Some consider Jesus to be simply a moralistic teacher telling us about God and how to stay out of trouble. If that is the role we assign to Jesus, we will have misunderstand who He is and what He is about. He tells stories, so we will get involved. He is calling us to join Him in the work of resurrection being carried out right now.

Here's another one of Jesus stories: the story of the sinners. Jesus sets this story in church, which is unique.

This is the only story Jesus told that is set in a place of worship. All His other stories take place in non-religious settings: farms and supper tables and weddings, and mostly they use non-religious words from the working world. The common language of exchange. But this story is in a place known for prayer.

We are in church today, so we take special notice of this story. It's of two men that probably represent people today who find themselves in church to pray.

One is a Pharisee. Pharisees for the most part had a pretty good opinion of themselves. And for the most part, they were liked by people in society. They were not warm and fuzzy, but they upheld the values of their society, so that most thought of them good and useful. Pharisees today probably are people who keep responsible jobs, care for their families, keep most of the commandments most of the time, and are familiar with the culture of church life. They give their offerings and worship God. And they often accept positions of leadership in church when asked.

The other man is a tax man. Taxmen in Jesus' day were despised, despicable people who exploited people right into poverty. Today tax men and women are not all that different in appearance from Pharisees, but inside they do not have a very good opinion of themselves. Many carry a huge burden of guilt.

Taxmen and tax women often attend church by fits and starts. Some of them do very well in their workplaces, but may carry a tangle of scars and may have a difficult time feeling at home and accepted in a church congregation. They may stop in from time to time and probably avoid staying past the Benediction, so they don't get to know anyone. That's probably harder to do in a small town, but we see them from time to time, these tax men and women, and we may know of their reputation.

Note in Jesus' story, both men have gone to church to pray. Both Pharisee and taxman have entered the church, and in so doing have joined a community of men and women, men and women who believe that listening and speaking to the God is at the very heart of being human. Listening and speaking to God who listens and speaks to us.

Mostly prayer is an interior act, though we do visibly stand and we sometimes fold our hands. Prayer is probably the most interior act we can engage in as we open our hearts to God. And important for this story is: being an interior act, no one can tell by observation whether another person is actually praying. It doesn't take us long to find this out for ourselves as well.

Eugene Peterson writes, *"[How easy it is to] "pray without actually praying, how easy it is to acquire a reputation as a man or woman who is on good terms with God without bothering to pay attention to God, how easy it is to use the*

setting of church and the forms and words of prayer to avoid the demanding work of dealing with God, with God's people, [and] with God's creation. No one goes to church to pray with the intention of not dealing with God, at least early on. But when we find that we can get so effortlessly all the social benefits of being associated with God without having to deal with God, it is hardly remarkable that form without content is so prevalent in places of prayer.” And our usual word for this outward appearance, this form without content, is hypocrisy.

You see frequenting a religious place and engaging in a religious practice can get us into a lot of trouble that we aren't even aware we are in. It did for this Pharisee.

Now Jesus does not use the word hypocrisy in telling this story. He uses it at other times, but in this story He gets us involved by putting us in church between the Pharisee and the tax man. Why? So we can see how hypocrisy works.

Hypocrisy is different from other sins. There's nothing attractive about it. Hypocrisy originates in a place of prayer and with people who pray. But there is usually a long pre-hypocrisy incubation period. No one is conscious of becoming a hypocrite. The line between that original impulse to be *“in on what God is doing”* and without awareness we cross that line through procrastination and we fail to attend to God on God's terms. We intended to

pray, looked like we were praying, but didn't pray. And at first, no one noticed, we didn't even notice.

Both men in Jesus story are sinners. There's no ambiguity on that. The taxman is a very visible conspicuous sinner, working in an occupation that exploited others to the point of impoverishment. A taxman could take as much money beyond the tax the people owed and that was his income. I don't want to even make comparisons to occupations today.

The Pharisee's status as sinner is not obvious, but probably, at least a few others in church noticed a bit of arrogance that called into question the sincerity or honesty of his prayers. Yet being dishonest in prayer, even being conceited, those sins do not carry the social disapproval that the taxman had. He knew he was a sinner and that everyone knew it; the Pharisee didn't know he was a sinner. Being pompous and dishonest in prayer are not even designated as sins. But the Pharisee is a sinner all the same. The taxman knows he is a sinner. The Pharisee doesn't have a clue that he is too.

Now I want to stop here for a second. It would be easy, too easy, to say one man is religious and the other one is spiritual. Like the taxman had a spiritual awakening and the Pharisee was deeply religious, but empty and didn't have the life of God filling him. But this is more complex than one was spiritual and the other was religious. The

moral isn't "*don't be religious, be real*" or "*Don't be religious, be authentic.*" Life is more complex than that.

A life of prayer is more complex than that. Both men are in a place of formal, institutional religion. Both are there to do the same thing, that is to pray. Both are there for good reasons.

Most people today who are a bit like the Pharisee are honestly at church to grow their relationship with God and cultivate their identity as followers of Jesus. They want that. That's good. They want to be known as followers of Jesus. That's commendable. Some can get tripped up in religious duties and turn prayer into formula, prayer as what religious folk are supposed to do. I can't really blame them, because that's mostly what we've been shown in church. How many times do we tell each other, "OK, it's time to pray." You can't blame a person, when they're doing, *just what they're supposed to do* and they want to do it. Let's then not get mad at the Pharisee for being religious. He's doing what he thinks he's supposed to do.

And then at church, from time to time, probably out of desperation, in steps a real "sinner," a person like the taxman. Good news. We're lucky he's here. Honestly, he's the antidote to being religious. He's the antidote to hypocrisy. Let's throw a party, the prodigal is home, and it wakes us up to real love and grace. *We lucky bums! Watch what happens when a taxman appears at church!*

Taxmen are the strongest offensive against hypocrisy imaginable. The honesty and freshness and innocence of a taxman's prayers are a powerful antidote to the hypocrisy that can be when we gather for worship. Ever heard someone "*Just pray,*" "*Just pray an unpolished heartfelt prayer?*" You hear the most honest expression of what's going on inside of them and it's real. We don't hear it very often, do we? Enter the taxmen or tax women in our lives and this parable comes back to us.

This is Jesus' third Travel Story about prayer. Jesus three times, through three stories, is getting us active in a life of prayer. Let's review quickly.

In the first story of the Friend in Luke 11 uses the ordinary activity of going next-door to borrow bread for an unexpected guest as a description of prayer. Prayer is not mystical, it is ordinary. Prayer is not a technique you can learn. It is as simple as a conversation in friendship. Prayer is not only to be used in emergencies, like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It is as common place as asking for and receiving bread in acts of every day hospitality. What takes place in our prayers to God is not so very different from what takes place all the time in our neighborhoods and families.

The second story of the Widow in Luke 18 helps us to reimagine what we so often call "unanswered prayers" as something quite different. If we think that the silence of God before our prayers is a matter of calloused

indifference, think again. God is the exact opposite of the evil judge in the story, opposite in every detail.

Prayer is not begging God to do something for us that He doesn't know about, or begging God to do something for us that He is reluctant to do, or begging God to do something that He hasn't time for. In prayer we persistently, faithfully, trustingly come before God confident that He is acting, right now, on our behalf. We are His chosen ones and don't ever forget it. God is, right now, working His will in your life and circumstances. If you are afraid, pray, *"Jesus catch my heart."* Keep praying and don't quit.

And this story of Pharisee and tax man. This story blows wide open the hypocrisy of any so-called prayer that is not personal and ordinary, any prayer not embedded in the personal relational language of every day life and friendship. Prayer is when we come to our Heavenly Father, sit down for dinner, and enjoy the time with Him.

Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."**

As comfortable as sitting at a meal with someone we want to be friends with is what prayer is all about. Not begging, not formula, not pretending to be something we think might be more acceptable. Jesus was accused of eating

with “tax collectors and sinners,” because surprise, surprise, this parable tells us, He loves “tax collectors and sinners.”

So whether you think you’re better than a taxmen or you know you’re worse than a taxman, or you’re not sure, Jesus has good news for you. Prayer is nothing formal, prayer is about you and God enjoying a friendship. Sometimes in friendship our words don’t matter, it’s just being there that counts.

Would you pray your own prayer during a few moments of silence, then I’ll close with a prayer?

We thank You God for Your many blessing. We thank You that if we open the door of our heart to You, You will come in and enjoy a meal with us and friendship. We thank You for those tax collectors in our lives who remind us of Your endless love and grace. You love us. We lucky bums! In Jesus name, Amen.