

BACKGROUND - 1 November 2015

Reading - Luke 18:9-14

When you read the parable at first, the message seems so plain and simple. The Pharisee is the bad cop while the tax collector is the hero.

But I am afraid that is the message when we read it through our modern day glasses or when we are “pre-influenced” by Luke’s introductory sentence namely: ⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt”.

To the first readers the meaning of this parable would be a totally different one. I also wrote about this in my recent “Letter from the Manse” that is today available.

In the first century, life was totally different. Each had a social map that defined their place in the world. This map told them who they were, how to react, who they were related to, how to behave and who belonged to their family and who did not. The centre of the map was the family with the father as head, then the village, the city and beyond to the ends of the earth.

Our parable’s setting is the city and is told by a peasant with a peasant’s point of view to city life which was always negative - something that is also visible in the Scottish culture when city folk are being referred to as “*townies*”. In our parable the temple is another map which replicates the kingdom of God. It clearly states who is the insider and who is the outsider.

According to the map of the first century Mediterranean culture the Pharisee was most certainly the insider to the temple. He did what he was called to do namely to go to the temple and do his daily prayers. He was one of the religious pious leaders of the nation of Israel who interpreted the law. The fact that he was standing by himself praying might suggest that this was part of the regular twice daily services. He was not praying privately. To stand and pray was normal practice. And the content of his prayer was not shocking since it was again part of the prescribed or standard form of prayer. Jewish people considered it pious to thank God for one’s righteousness, rather than taking credit for it oneself. The first hearers of this parable would not think of the Pharisee as boastful, but

rather as grateful to God for his piety. His prayer is one of thanksgiving since he is thanking God that he is not like the “outsiders” whom the map places outside like the “robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector”.

Typically like the form prescribed he added two of his regular temple/religious duties namely his fasting and tithing. They usually fasted twice a week on the second and the fifth days of the week. The reason assigned for the selection of these days is because it was supposed to be on the second day of the week that Moses went up into Mount Sinai to receive the two tablets of the law, and it was on the fifth day of the week that he came down on account of the idolatry concerning the golden calf. These days were chosen, not only when public fasts were to be observed, but also when individuals fasted privately.

Tithing was just as equally important. So the Pharisee is just showing that he is indeed following the rules of the temple map – he is the model of the pious man.

But the temple map also settles the tax collectors place. He is standing at a distance, not allowed to lift his eyes to heaven, and speaks of himself as a “sinner” not belonging to the “insiders” of the temple map. He also does not pray a prayer of thanksgiving but one that signifies mourning by beating on his breast. He clearly knows his place according to the temple map.

Nothing so far in this parable would be out of the ordinary for a first century Mediterranean reader. Everything was happening according to the good rules of their society. This is exactly the kind of behaviour you would expect from a respected Pharisee and one of the resentful tax collectors. But then a shocking thing does happen when the temple map is being reversed by the author. Instead of the usual Pharisee being declared as the “righteous” the tax collector gets the honour. The insiders becomes all of a sudden the outsider and vice versa.

So what on earth could this mean? The answer lies in the fact that in this parable, as I have previously stated the temple map is the replication of the kingdom of God. And in God’s kingdom the roles and the maps are reversed. It is not who you think is pious but God who decides. God will decide who the righteous and who the sinners are, the insiders and the

outsiders. In God's kingdom different maps and rules do apply. In our parable the holy are now outside the temple or the kingdom of God and the unholy inside the temple or the kingdom of God. Why? Because God looks with different eyes at the human race.

The old maps have gone. It can no longer predict who will be an insider or the outsider. Trust God, obey Him and live in a relationship with him - that is what counts!

Amen

REFLECTION

Our parable this morning clearly highlights the dangers of ritualism or forced duty. Both of the characters in our parable were bound by tradition and ritualistic duties. There was no chance for the tax collector to be ever included in the "insiders" fold of God's merciful love. But Jesus came to the world and through His death, resurrection and ascension He made it possible for you and me to be included in God's kingdom.

So yes we cannot look at this parable and think that the meaning is simply to identify ourselves with either the Pharisee or the tax collector. The meaning lies in the fact that God changed the ancient rules of society. He completely turned the old world upside down. This is emphasized with verse 14: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." He changed the Jewish outlook whereby only those who are the "insiders", can be called "righteous". Our parable clearly states that God has declared each and every person that believes in Jesus Christ righteous. In plain English: God has decided who will go to heaven. It is God who will be the ONE who makes the decision who is righteous or not. It is no longer humans who can dictate and make up rules or traditions of either excluding or including certain individuals.

No, our parable needs to be looked at from a totally different perspective. It is about self-awareness. Who are we? If we say that we are redeemed sinners and belong to God, we need to show it through our love of God.

God gave His very self to us so that you and I can live in the full glory of God's love. And all that God wants from you and me is gratitude – a life

full of thanksgiving by giving ourselves, and everything that we own to His service.

So when we talk about time, gifts and money, we are not allowed to think of them as if they belong to us. No – they belong to God and the sooner we realise this the better our lives will be.

Our parable is about “change”, God changing the old ways into His new way. And God is telling us this morning that if we are thinking that our money, everything that we own belongs to us, we are making a big mistake. Everything that we have belongs to God. We spent so much money on things that are temporary but when we are asked to give financially to the church, we tend to moan and groan, emptying the “savings jar” for our pennies.

I think when you and I make the right connection between our giving and the gratitude we owe to God, then it will not be a matter of how much we give but HOW we give, I mean with the right attitude, with THANKSGIVING.

I think our parable is telling us this morning also that God knows our hearts. Although the tax collector might have iterated the standard form of an “outsiders” prayer, God saw something else. God saw that he meant the words “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” So let us go out today and:

Say the things that we really mean,

Give our offerings with sincerity and thanksgiving,

Love unconditionally like God loved us,

Hold on to the hope that God has declared all who have faith in Him righteous!

Amen