

## **SERMON: Sunday – 23 October 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **True Humility**

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

I grew up in Penicuik and went to Sunday school, Bible Class and YF. And two of my leaders were Susan Atwell and Derek Brown. I looked up to them and learned from them. Years later, Susan and Derek got married and both went into full time paid ministry. Susan Brown as she became, was of course Moderator of the GA three years ago. I mention her because she sent round a REFLECTION this week on the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which I thought was worth sharing. It's thinking of the parable teaching humility but that true humility isn't always black and white. It's often found in the grey, as much of life seems to be. Here it is:

Black and white.

If only life was so simple, eh?

If only there were just two choices we ever had to face

Just two options to choose between –

One clearly right,

And one every bit as clearly, wrong.

But that's not how things work is it?

Too often there are multiple choices

Each with their pros and their cons:

Their good points and not so good.

It can be really hard to know which way to turn.

Which means that even with the best of intentions

We can end up taking the wrong path

And head off in a direction that's not for the best.

And people too,

People are that complicated mix of good and bad,

Right and wrong.

A touch of the best and the worst,

Lies within each of us.

And that goes for

Every person on the planet.

We all have the capacity  
to be so, so kind  
And  
Even in the very next breath  
We can be so, so cruel;  
Towards others,  
And ourselves.

Which is why,  
taking a single snapshot from anyone's life  
And drawing firm conclusions from it  
Is just too simplistic.  
One episode.  
One event.  
One reaction –  
Is just that!  
It is one among many other  
Episodes  
And events  
And reactions.

Who's to say that the Pharisee we have just heard about,  
Might not have been the humbler one  
The next time he was in the Temple?  
And could it be that the tax collector's prayer that day  
Was more self-aware than anything he had ever uttered before –  
Or ever uttered after?

All I'm saying is  
I get what Jesus is telling us about  
Not judging  
And being humble -  
But that non-judgemental humility  
Also needs to give people  
The benefit of the doubt  
through not allowing one,  
Single,  
solitary moment  
To define a person.  
Forever.

Because  
The truth is  
We are all  
that complicated mix.  
All of us.

Not just Pharisees  
And tax-collectors –  
But working folk  
and retired  
and young  
and old,  
as well as those of us who are good with our hands  
and those who are not.  
Thinkers.  
Dreamers.  
Doers -  
All of us need a second chance.  
And a third  
And a fourth  
A five hundredth  
And a ten thousandth!

And if that's true for us –  
Then is not equally as true  
For all those around us?

Let's not judge  
Or dismiss people.  
Instead, in true humility,  
let's refuse to write anyone off –  
Praying that others  
Might be as generous with us.

Unlike last week's parable, Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the tax-collector at prayer seems to be unambiguous in its meaning and is applicable to any age and social setting. God is not impressed with those who make a big show of being better than everyone else and who look down on other people.

This is consistent with much of the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures (see, for example, the book of Amos and God's spurning of religious worship from those who cheat others in the marketplace or deprive them of justice in the courts of law).

It also reflects the values of the Kingdom as described in Jesus' teaching and lived out in his relationships with others. He made a point of associating with those who were regarded as the lowest of the low in the society of his day and reserved his harshest criticism for those 'whited sepulchres' (Matthew 23:27), the Jewish religious leaders, who were Persil-white on the outside and putrid underneath.

The question remains, not of what the parable may mean but whether those who needed to hear it would realise that it applied to them.

Luke's preamble tells us, To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.

We can imagine the disciples thinking 'I hope those Pharisees are paying attention!', the Pharisees thinking 'Well said, Jesus, I hope the Sadducees are listening!' and so on. It is always easier to see the self in someone else's eye than to be aware of the muckle great plank of wood in our own (Matthew 7:3-5).

Aside from its main purpose, the parable gives some interesting insights into the nature of prayer in a 1st century Jewish setting. Private prayers were said aloud, so that if other people were in earshot, they could hear what was said.

They were not just prayers of petition—asking God for something, as in the parable of the widow and the judge— but followed a liturgical pattern which included thanksgiving ('I thank you that I am not like other people') and penitence ('God, be merciful to me, a sinner!').

This feels very familiar to Christian worshippers as early church practice was modelled on what happened in the synagogue.

The main point of the parable, however, is to enable Jesus' hearers and Luke's readers (including ourselves) to see things from the divine point of view—to 'repent', or 'think again' in the literal sense of the Greek word used for repentance, *metanoia*.

God is not impressed with the Pharisee's prayer, which is, in any case, directed horizontally towards the tax-collector and others whom he wanted to impress, rather than vertically towards God in heaven. I'm not saying God is only up there I'm just mirroring Jesus use of language when he refers to the tax collector not looking up to heaven.

It was to prevent such blatant hypocrisy (as shown by the Pharisee) that Jesus advised his disciples (Matthew 6: 5-7) to pray in the privacy of their own room, and using simple, straightforward language such as the template which he gave them in what has become known as the 'Lord's Prayer'.

God sees through both the extravagance of the Pharisee's boasting and the abject despair of the tax-collector's plea to the real person underneath. What he is looking for is authenticity, and on that count the tax-collector wins hands-down. He stands 'far off', not wanting anyone to see or hear him, and although he is too ashamed to lift his eyes to heaven, it is God alone from whom he craves mercy and forgiveness. He has little hope of his prayer being

granted, as the nature of his work collecting taxes for the hated Romans—whether or not he syphoned off more than he should for himself—placed him forever beyond the pale.

In the kingdom, Jesus says, all our normal values and expectations are reversed. The first will be last and the last will be first ((Matthew 29: 16); the mighty will be toppled and the humble lifted high (Luke 1: 52); the important guests will find themselves barred from the banquet while ragamuffins and ne'er-do-wells have an honoured place at the table (Luke 14: 15-24). Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear!

Richard Rohr, in his book, *The Little Way: A Spirituality of Imperfection*, claims that with this parable, Jesus is inviting us to struggle with the contrast between a spirituality of perfection and a spirituality of imperfection.

He says that the Pharisees were simply religious people trying to obey the law, just like many faithful Christians today. And as always, Jesus, with his non-dual way of thinking, refuses to judge people as black or white but gets to the heart of the matter, led the Spirit.

We might not speak it out loud but we might think it think inside “I’m a good person. I don’t steal; I don’t cheat” and hold a positive, superior self-image on why we’re right and why we’re good.

To quote Richard Rohr: “Many religious people think that it’s all a merit badge system—all achievement, accomplishment, performance, and perfection. The good people win and the bad people lose. Of course, once we cast anything as a win-lose scenario, the irony is that everybody loses. Why can’t people see that competitive games are not the way to go? I’m convinced that Jesus’ good news is that God’s choice is always for the excluded one. Jesus learned this from his Jewish tradition: God always chooses the rejected son, the barren woman, the people enslaved in Egypt or exiled in Babylon. It’s not a winner’s script in the Bible—it’s a loser’s script. It’s a loser’s script where, ironically, everybody wins”.

So what then is true humility? CS Lewis said that “True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

It’s having a healthy regard for the self, or as Jesus said elsewhere simply loving God, loving neighbour as you love yourself, knowing that God holds and sustains and grows everything for the good of all.

Let us pray,  
Lord, remind me  
that following you  
is not a competitive sport,

my sin is not diminished  
because I deem another's sin as greater,  
my perceived righteousness  
does not lessen  
my need of your grace.  
Once again,  
you break free our binary world, pitching up with grace.

In the prayer of confession  
and in your words of absolution may I experience your grace  
powerfully and vitally.  
Let the experience of your forgiveness change the way I encounter others,  
softening those hard edges  
that make me quick to judge, smoothing out the abrasions  
that foster harshness.

May the knowledge of your infinite, healing love encourage me to risk being  
hurt  
again and again  
as I live into  
that part of you that dwells in me  
and connects with your image in others.

May humility consist in recognising the sheer wonder of your creation shining  
through us  
bringing glory to you  
And may we live into  
and live out of  
the forgiveness we receive from you.