

“What Jesus Sees”
A Sermon by J. H. Reed
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Nacogdoches, Texas
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Text: Luke 18:9-14
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22

Jesus watched very closely. Perhaps he actually *stared*, even in the temple. And he listened. The temple was an extremely public place. And Jesus took advantage of it. It helped him shape his teaching, by watching.

He taught some lessons because he knew how some people believed. Today’s parable he taught because of some, some who trusted in themselves, we are clued by Luke, who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.

Before I go too far, I might say that this short parable is one of my two favorite parables. The other favorite is even shorter than this one. My affection might or might not appear from this sermon, but I love it.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed like this, “God, I thank you that I am different from other men, extortioners, oppressors, adulterers.” Jesus has him add a poison aside, “or even this tax collector.”

Is it a joke that the Pharisee feels compelled to list his attributes for God's listening? I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' Mercifully, he stops there—but we've gotten the picture. Haven't we?

Let's stop there, too, and just admit the truth, that this Pharisee is the kind of church member we like and have wanted, if we're honest. Boy I have—and others have said so, too! Generous to a fault and deeply devoted. He neglects his own hunger to show he loves God. Let's find some more of this kind of church member, I say. Who cares if they're a little self-righteous! At least we can count on them in the long run. [Robert Dunham of University Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina].

The other one stands back, a long way from others. Farther than the farthest back-row crowd in the biggest church in this town. I think Jesus had seen this. It sounds original with Jesus to me. This isn't a parable he retold—it's original with him. He'd been watching and listening, he had. And *what* a plaintive prayer he depicts. *Ab-ject* sorrow. *Profound* distress. *Bitter* remorse. *Monstrous*, wordless regret. Utter, *complete* despair.

A former psychotherapist of mine would have said this man was a bit too hard on himself. Indeed, he literally beats himself up, pounding his chest. Trust me, Jesus had seen this, too. And Jesus *loved* this man, though the man's words were as painful as *hell* for

Jesus to hear. Jesus had them in his mind, in his heart. He knew people who prayed like this, or needed to, or wanted to, or did inside *every day*.

“God, be merciful to me a sinner!”

Just seven words in English.

Trapped in UN-righteousness. Lost in misdoing with no visible escape but for the infinite, hoped for, but only barely-believed kindness and help of God. No living person could help him. We righteous Christians think and hope and trust that we or someone we know could help him, but probably not. No program, no mission, no course, no book, no snappy Bible verse, no distraction, no suggestion, no bus ticket to the next town, no recommended self-help thought to cling to. Maybe an empathic look from someone, maybe from you, with no words, but probably not even that.

“God, be merciful to me a sinner!”

Another preacher would spring right straight from that self-recognition of his sin into the next necessary step on the steady, upward path to salvation by speaking of the obvious answer of repentance. *“Great! He sees his need, now if he will only turn from his ways.”* Yeah...sure, that happens. Yes, it's possible... But it is unholy of us to jump straight to the standard version of neat, clean repentance from this parable, because this parable is yet one more

that is frankly as far removed from trust in human progress and possibility as the stricken tax collector was from the other worshipers in the temple.

Jesus sees God's mercy alive, stretching people into real people, reshaping the life of the church...and the world.

One of the men who stood before God was thankful, no, really he was, truly thankful that he was *not corrupted*. We may be sad that he saw himself that way, especially because he'd have made such a great church member, but his outlook was authentic and it fed him what he needed in life. Those who have no need of a physician, said Jesus, have no need of me.

On the other hand, we are shown a *most* insecure supplicant who *literally* beat himself up, who didn't fit in...*but who was deeply and magnificently and piteously self-aware*. He was aware of his own lack, his own need in relation to God. And my understanding and perspective is that *that* made him likewise perfectly aware of his lack and his need in relation to other people. He felt sorrow and remorse and despair and tragedy over his own powerlessness to control whatever relationships he was part of. Most people want to *control* their relationships, but the fact is *none of us can control relationships*. We can sometimes choose to act with self-integrity, no matter how others behave, but we cannot determine how another will act in relation to us.

Whatever showed him his way into the temple that day, the sinful tax collector had a sense that the attraction between himself and God was based on what God has to give—which is all the things humans forfeit by their sinfulness.

The justification footnote in the parable—where Jesus says this man, not the Pharisee, went down to his house justified—speaks about the peaceful, non-anxious, open, warm, affectionate, respectful relationships that open up when people know and admit their vulnerability to each other. Maybe only to themselves, but if they're aware of themselves then relationships of warmth and peace open to them. But I repeat, Jesus said only ONE of the worshipers found reconciliation with God that day, found connection with God that day.

I haven't seen Richard for about since high school graduation 49 years ago. When I started 7th grade, physical education, P.E., stopped and *football* started. It was an electric time those late August days for a boy in the 7th grade. Let me tell you what happened the first day we got our uniforms and suited out. Now, you already know that *everything* for 7th graders was about machismo and swagger and ability to impress, even if 99% of us were totally faking it, and though this incident was more than a year before the first super bowl would be played. The shoulder pads and helmets our school owned and gave out were terrible.

Really baaaad. They didn't make anyone look tough, mean, or threatening. But we didn't care—we thought they did.

On the day I'm remembering, the whole class of 7th grade boys was out on the field, anxious to get going with football on the first day of practice, when Richard came running out after the rest of us.

Now Richard lived in the country, he had no television and possibly he had never seen a football. I knew his parents didn't bring him to town on Friday nights for the high school games.

Richard didn't understand the uniform, and must have had lots of trouble getting it on—he was the last one to run from the gym out onto the field, as I said.

But at last, here he came...running onto the field, yes... with his helmet on,,backwards, with the face guard on his neck.

...How can you live something down like that? And what I want to say is that of all the mighty self-important champion 7th grade football players on the field that day, the one who returned to his home that day who had worn a helmet backwards on his head the first morning of practice—really, you know, he alone received God's love and care. He received the scorn of all the others who thought highly of themselves. But he received God's love.

See, this parable is not strictly about sinfulness and forgiveness—it is also about the vain, the rich, the powerful—and

the judgment so often held for the weak, the vulnerable, the hopeless, the ignorant, the poor.

Of all places in the world where people want and need to be *just people*, it's in God's house, because they usually cannot be just people anywhere else. At least they should be able to be shown in church that they are just people, truly dependent on God, and *truly* loved by God. But, for God's sake, in church, in the temple, must not be the only place.

During any period in history when the church gets to live free from real persecution—not the kind of ridiculous, pitiful whiny persecution that even national leaders have suggested Christianity is suffering presently, to the shame of the historic church, but the real, harsh, terrible persecution like the church has faced in many prior periods of history—during times free of persecution the church drifts into what I call “religion-lite,” where people are really just getting vaccinated. Oh, yes, vaccination has been in increasing use by the church. Did you know that the church inoculates or vaccinates people? Forget the present discussion about vaccination, the atrocious anti-vaxer movement today that is endangering thousands of children and now adults. Think back to when vaccination saved millions, as it will hopefully do once more.

The inoculation the church in our lifetime has received during free and peaceful exercise of religion has produced people who are now effectively resistant to the raging, radical faith that plagued—and formed--much of the New Testament church, and the Reformation church, too. With the help of inoculation people now receive only a little bit of awareness of their spiritual needs, only enough information about the Bible to know they don't want any more information. Christian education is just for kids, right? Inoculation in church gives people only enough encounter with other believers, real encounter, to build up their resistance so that they don't have to suffer the full-blown epidemic form of Christian faith.

Anytime I get to speak with someone else about the love of Jesus over life's deep pain, I frequently recall how he surmised the prayers of two quite opposite men who stood in God's presence to pray. Doing that reminds me of what he sees to this day, what he sees in me and in that other person. Jesus sees aching, broken hearts. He sees faith under great pressure. He sees us at our best, and at our very, very worst. And as he watches he invokes God's mercy on behalf of the powerless, the weak, the children, the immigrant. He brings those in despair of being cut off from God into places of hope-filled lives of faith in God. Jesus gives his

followers security meant to make us feel free in God's great love and mercy.

I wonder where Jesus was present this week, watching, listening. I bet he was present in your conversations this week, too. I remember someone said that we forget what people say and what they do, but we do not forget how they make us feel.

And when I think of Jesus watching I can't remember all the things he said, and I can't remember all the things he did, but I can remember how he makes me feel. And I hope it's something like the tax collector who went down to his house justified that day.