

**It’s Hard to Be Humble**

**October 23, 2016**

**Luke 19:9-14**

Grace and Peace to you from God Our Father and from Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

Every time I read this parable I can’t help but think of the song from 1980 “It’s Hard to Be Humble”. The part I remember went like this:

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble

When you're perfect in every way.

I can't wait to look in the mirror

Cause I get better looking each day

To know me is to love me

I must be a hell of a man.

O Lord it's hard to be humble

But I'm doing the best that I can.

I think this song captures the just of how the Pharisee in this story must feel. I also believe it’s how Christians ever since Jesus told this parable feel. I mean Jesus proclaims the humble tax collector to be the one who receives God’s blessing, while the Pharisee goes home after Church Services unchanged. Jesus follows up by saying the exalted will be humbled and the humble will be exalted. So, we’re supposed to be humble, no matter how perfect we might feel…

I do think this story goes a little deeper than this superficial exhortation against overconfident egotism in our prayer life. It points out two competing realities, righteousness and justification. I know these are two really big “Churchy” words, but if you bear with me I think you’ll see the difference and why they make a difference in your life today.

To be righteous, according to the Bible, is to conform your life to the law. It means to achieve, through diligent effort, a life that reflects the tenets of the Torah and in this way remain in relationship with the Holy One of Israel. To be justified, however, is to be called and considered worthy and restored to right relationship with God by God’s own action rather than by our own.

Righteousness according to the law, I should first say, is a wonderful thing, the goal of so much of the instruction and exhortation of the Old and New Testaments. But there’s two challenges with the righteousness that comes through diligent observance of the law. The first is that it’s very difficult for most of us to achieve. (I actually believe it’s impossible, but I know that is my own theological bias and that in the Old Testament there is the expectation, even confidence, that one can be righteous according to the law, and Luke and Paul both write from this perspective.) So, if not impossible, it’s certainly very difficult, and most of us, if we take the law seriously, will not only acknowledge that we fall short, but may despair of our ability to be in right relationship with God through our own efforts.

Second challenge when we try to live righteously by our own efforts, is if we are successful, there is the subtle, but evil temptation to assess not only ourselves according to the law, but everyone else too. Instead of the Law being a gift from God to help us have a just and civil society, we use the Law to judge ourselves against how we think everyone else is doing and we believe we’re so much better than them. This is exactly what we see in the Pharisee’s prayer. He’s keenly aware of the differences between himself and his neighbors and uses that difference to distance himself from them. Remember CORFing from last week? They are no longer neighbors or fellow citizens, let alone children of the same God, but rather “other people.” Righteousness all too often devolves quickly into self-righteousness and cuts us off from true relationship with those God has given to us as brothers and sisters.

To be justified is entirely different. Justification, in contrast to righteousness, does not depend on our own efforts and actually has nothing to do with our effort. We can take neither credit nor responsibility for our standing before God. The most we can do is recognize we are recipients of a profound gift. Looking around us, we see all others in a similar vein, people that God has created and loves and out of love has also justified. Justification is all God no me.

Love is, in fact, the key to understanding justification. Think about it: we don’t remain in relationship our spouse based on their perfect behavior, but out of love. (And let’s not forget that those most important to us also remain in relationship with us despite our many shortcomings.) Love and forgiveness – these are the key elements of justification because they initiate and maintain relationship.

While this distinction between righteousness and justification is important theologically, it’s far more important in terms of our everyday lives. We all work really hard to be righteous – that is, to do well in our various responsibilities as parents, employees, friends, children, church members, citizens, volunteers, and more. We always try to do the “Right” thing. That’s all well and good, but it’s also vitally important to be reminded our worth doesn’t depend on our accomplishments! You are a beloved child of God and of infinite worth to God. You are free to do your best in every facet of your life, not because you deserve God’s love, or to earn it, but because you already have it.

If there is one difficulty about justification, it is that it runs so contrary to our culture, which always seems to stress the need to justify ourselves by our accomplishments, wealth, youth, or possessions. What use is justification to the self-made man or woman, the rugged individualist, our culture values so highly? Maybe that’s why there is so much anguish, despair, and depression today. The goal of being self-made, self-sufficient, and impervious to need is a myth, even a lie that is a crushing burden to carry and is eventually exposed by any illness or loss. The fact is we are dependent, vulnerable, finite creatures. As difficult or painful as that may seem to admit, the moment we do we’re freed from the burden of self-justification. When we recognize we are totally dependent on God, we begin to see ourselves as beloved Children of God and recipients of an amazing gift, and sent out on a mission to love and care for all those around us.

Two men went to the Temple. One went up and returned righteous – and there is something to admire about that – but the other returned justified, and in the face of justification all we can do is give thanks. Many of us come to and leave church righteous according to the standards of our culture. How many will leave today justified? How many of you are aware that what matters is not what you’ve done or will do in the future, but what God has done for you in Jesus Christ?

There once was a man who was righteous according to the Law. He died and went to heaven. Upon arrival at the Pearly Gates, Saint Peter informed him he would need 1000 points to unlock the gate and enter into heaven. He thought this would be a cinch and began listing off all his good works, starting with his youth. He was involved in the youth group at Church and served in all the leadership positions. As an adult he served on every committee and in every position on the Church Council. He was the president of the congregation several times throughout his life. He prayed regularly. He did mission work. As he described all his activities Saint Peter seemed impressed and the Angel Assistant was furiously adding up all the man’s accomplishments. He got out his angelic calculator and when he was finished adding up the man’s total he showed it to Saint Peter who congratulated the man on being such a good worker for God’s Kingdom. He told the man his total points added up to 379. Hearing this, the man began thinking harder about all the things he might have left out. He told about helping the homeless find shelter and working at the food bank every week. He recounted the 4, no 5 times he went to Haiti and his three trips to China spreading the Gospel and helping to build Churches and hospitals. After he finished, he was certain he would have more than the 1000 points required to enter heaven. The angel quickly finished adding the man’s total and once again he was congratulated. Rarely had they ever seen anyone as righteous. Peter looks at the clipboard and says, “This is quite exceptional! You’re now up to 402 points. Can you think of anything else?” The man strives to recall any last good deeds no matter how small, like the time he helped a little old lady across the street. He finally arrives at a grand total of 431 points and cries out, “I’m sunk! There’s no hope for me! What more could I have done? O Lord, all I can do is beg for your mercy!” “THAT,” exclaims Peter, “is a thousand points!” “Enter into the joy of your Master!”

I’d like to change the lyric of my song…

Oh, Lord it’s not hard to be humble,

‘Cus you’re perfect in every way.

Every time I look in the mirror,

I see more of you in my face.

To know you is to love you,

You are one merciful God.

So, Lord it’s not hard to be humble,

‘Cus your Grace makes me all that I am!

Amen!