

IN DEFENSE OF THE PHARISEE

TEXT: Luke 18:9-14

PROPOSITION: There are times when we need to look at the "bad guy" in a story and think about what circumstances caused us to dislike him. We may find that we are not too different from him.

AIM: To take a look at the other side of a situation.

INTRODUCTION:

I'm going to start out telling you something you probably don't know about me. I am a champion for the underdog. When something – or someone – is being maligned, I tend to go racing into the fray and find something to defend – something that may put a better light, or perspective, on the person or situation.

Well, what can you say about Pharisees? Throughout the New Testament they are the proverbial "bad guys". They are the ones Jesus picked on to make his point on several occasions. He chastised them for seeking the places of honor at feasts. He brought them up short when they stood for tradition rather than what helped others. He once said to them: "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness." And we know how he dealt with them when he healed the sick on the Sabbath. Even his cousin John called the Pharisees "a brood of vipers" when they came to the Jordan to be baptized.

But did you know that the Pharisees weren't always the "bad guys"? Earlier in Luke it was the Pharisees who came to warn Jesus when Herod was seeking to kill him. In several instances Jesus was invited to eat in the homes of the Pharisees. Some of our Biblical heroes were from the Sanhedrin. We know that Paul was one of those, as was Joseph of Arimathia who bravely went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body, giving up his own tomb for his burial.

I. WHO WERE THE PHARISEES?

So, who were these guys anyway? Well, they were one of the three sects among the Jews. The Essenes lived a simple life of sharing everything in common. They followed strict rules and were often unmarried.

The Sadducees, who believed only in the Mosaic Law, rejecting the oral tradition, were another sect. They also denied the concept of resurrection. Although they were a rather small group, they held the high priesthood.

The Pharisees were a larger group and were the strictest of all the sects. They studied, interpreted and applied the Mosaic Law and the oral tradition in minute detail. You can see how this strict adherence to the ancient laws – as detailed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy – would not mesh well with Jesus and his new way of thinking. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in spirit life and resurrection. They also believed that salvation was to be earned by strict obedience to rules, and with good deeds. They were the most influential of the sects.

II. ARE WE LIKE THE PHARISEES?

I guess that I get somewhat defensive when I begin thinking that everyone in any given group or class falls into a mold. We Christians have a penchant for accusing those who disagree with us as "acting like Pharisees". This sounds to me a bit like the nonbelievers who refer to Christians as "Bible thumpers".

In studying a bit more about Pharisees, I note that the Jews divided the Pharisees into seven groups. Let's see how they are described – and how we stack up against them.

Number 1: "The Shoulder Type". This person wears his good deeds on his shoulders so that everyone may see them and admire him. How often do we wear our good deeds on our shoulders? How often do we strive to make sure that we get credit for something? We check to make certain that our names are on the list of donors. We are upset when the chair of the committee fails to acknowledge our magnificent contributions to a project. We credit our own goodness and outstanding abilities for what is accomplished rather than giving the glory to God for a successful outcome.

Number 2: "Wait-a-little". These are the folks who always seem to have a reason to put off doing an act of kindness. It is so easy to find excuses for not doing what we know we should do. I am too busy. My work is so demanding. My family responsibilities are so heavy. I am too old, too young, too tired. It can wait until tomorrow, next week, next year. So we put off the call, the card, the visit to the lonely friend or relative until it is too late.

Number 3: "Bruised and Bleeding". Because it was forbidden for a Rabbi to be seen talking to a woman, even his own wife or mother or daughter, in public, some men were determined not to even look at a woman on the street. To avoid doing so, they walked around with their eyes shut. Naturally, this caused them to run into obstacles, resulting in wounds which they displayed as proof of their piety.

Ostentatious displays of piety are so easy to spot in others. We can point to the person who sings hymns or prays too loudly (oh, oh), or the one who prays or sings too quietly. We can spot the person wearing too much showy religious jewelry or the person we consider to be dressed conspicuously simply. We know what those folks are about. But in criticizing, even in our hearts, we become guilty ourselves.

Number 4: "Hump-backed". In displays of false modesty, these men walked around with their heads bent over. I suspect that from time to time each of us has been guilty of false modesty. Sometimes it is a ploy to get others to recognize how accomplished we really are. Other times, when asked to take a position of responsibility

we downplay our abilities to avoid the task rather than trusting God to equip us. In any case, false modesty is a sin that keeps us from doing our best for God.

Number 5: "Ever-reckoning". These Pharisees were continually trying to balance their accounts with God by doing just enough good deeds to counteract those they neglected to do. Whenever we fall into the trap of thinking that we can bargain with God, we are in deep trouble. God is not a heavenly CPA keeping a spread sheet on each of us. It is not our good deeds that cancel our sins. Rather it is God's grace given through Christ that is our atonement.

Number 6: "God-fearing". These are the Pharisees who lived every moment in fear of God's wrath. When we act out of fear and compulsion rather than a spirit of love, we are not fulfilling what God wants of us. In fear, we fail to trust God. When we fail to emphasize the forgiving, loving nature of our creator, we turn others away from experiencing him. We become the cause for their rejection of Christ.

Number 7: "God-loving". Here we come to the shining light, the Pharisees who lived by the example of Abraham in faith and charity. Too often we ignore the fact that there were Pharisees, even some members of the Sanhedrin, who were followers of Christ.

III. HOW AM I LIKE THE PHARISEE?

Today I want to see just how I may be like this Pharisee. I don't think he's any worse than you or me. In fact, maybe he's the sort of person we can only hope to be. He's concerned to live a holy life, a godly life, a faithful life, like all of us should be. He never misses a bible study, or Sunday school, or a worship service. He reads his bible and prays every day, so he will grow and grow in his faith. But none of this, none of his holiness, none of his faithfulness, absolutely nothing of the way he is following God's will draws him into God's presence.

In his prayer, he's praying something all of us could pray, or have prayed, "God, thank you that I am not a thief, or a rogue, or an adulterer". There's nothing wrong with thanking God for his grace to keep us from evil, to keep us from sin, to keep us on the right path. Isn't this exactly what we pray when we pray the Lord's Prayer? "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil".

There's nothing wrong with thanking God to keep us from being a thief, from stealing, from swindling people. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with thanking God that we are not adulterers. There's nothing wrong with what this guy thanks God for. There's nothing wrong with his words – he's got some good prayers, prayers maybe we should pray for ourselves. And, it's hard to say why he's wrong to thank God that he is not like that tax collector. Nobody wants to be that guy.

Being a tax collector is one of the worst jobs you can have – even today. The Roman Empire kept Israel under its dominion for one reason and one reason alone: taxes. And these aren't the kinds of taxes that some central government collects to build more schools, or hire more public servants, or provide more social services. These taxes have nothing to do with any of that. These taxes are about funding Rome as it extends its Empire into new territories.

So we see this poor tax collector, an ordinary fellow who can't get a job so he does the only thing available for him to do: he goes to work for the IRS – in this case the Roman rulers. He's a Jew, part of God's people, who is now the face of the Roman occupation among his enslaved people. And he has to make sure that his people pay him the taxes the Romans demand of him, or else he gets no food, no place to live, no way to provide for his family, no way to pay the rent. He's desperate.

And every day his former friends pass him by, and shake their heads in disbelief and disapproval. They consider this man unclean. He works for Rome; he embodies, Rome's power and authority.

So this man – this dishonorable tax collector – goes to the temple. But he waits at the margins, among the unclean. He doesn't dare encroach upon the holy ground, up close to the temple, where God's glory, God's holiness, God's presence, dwells in fullness. He is too faithful to God. He cares too much for God's holiness to desecrate God's holy place with his unclean presence.

CONCLUSION

So what is the point of this story? I don't believe it is to condemn the Pharisee for being a Pharisee. Or to hold up the tax collector either. It asks us a simple question that makes everything about our lives complicated. It asks, *Where are you standing? Where do you stand when you pray?* It comes from Jesus' description in verse 11: "The Pharisee, *standing by himself*, was praying." **Standing by himself.** He prays the right words. But the right words, the right kind of prayers, don't get him any closer to God. Why? Because it's not about what you pray; it's about who you pray with; it's about where you stand when you pray.

God is not with the Pharisee. God is with the tax collector, the unclean, the victim of the messed up world, the lowly.

Where do we go when we pray? Do we stand alone, separate from the world, holy, undisturbed by people beating their chests and desperately crying out for mercy? What if we joined the prayer groups at homeless shelters? What if we wandered away from the personal spaces we secure with our money, our lifestyles, our social power, our geography, and learned to pray with people who need God's merciful hand to rescue them from a lowly and humiliated life? What if we found that we are as much like the Pharisee as we are like the tax collector? What if we suddenly realized that we are all in need of prayer, in need of the grace of God? At the end of the story about the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus says, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." The Pharisee has much to learn about humility; we all have much to learn as well.