

## **“This Man Went Home Justified”**

**Luke 18:9-14, Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017**

Brothers and sisters it really does happen more often than those in the medical community would like to admit—that every so often there is an **inappropriate handling of a human heart**.

Take, for example, a newspaper article that appeared in the January 20<sup>th</sup> 1995 edition of a newspaper published in Vancouver, Washington (“The Columbian”). That newspaper article was entitled: **“Nurse Drops Heart, Then Trashes It.”** Apparently, a registered nurse named Wanda Condon was working in that part of a big hospital in Spokane, Washington that received **human organs, donated for the benefit of others, from those persons who were recently deceased**. One day, Nurse Condon accidentally dropped a “donated” human heart on to the floor.

While still in a great state of panic—not knowing exactly what she should do next—she instinctively picked it up threw it in a trashcan because she feared it had been contaminated. When the truth was later discovered that she had **falsified documents to indicate that the dropped heart had actually been shipped** to a Tissue Recovery Laboratory, though it, in fact, it hadn’t, Wanda Condon was found guilty, the article reported (and I quote) of: “Unprofessional conduct for the inappropriate handling of a human heart donated for transplant purposes!” Upon which, she was reprimanded and fined, but not fired.

Then again, on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the Associated Press released another news report about another “donor human heart” that was transported on a helicopter to Mexico City. Soon after exiting the chopper, one of the medics—entrusted with the safe delivery of that very precious human heart accidentally stumbled, causing the plastic-wrapped human heart contained in its blue-colored ice cooler to tumble out onto the pavement. The medic immediately returned the heart to the cooler, along with a lot of the ice that had also spilled out of the cooler, and brought it to the hospital where the recipient was waiting. Fortunately team of surgeons decided to proceed with their heart-transplant surgery, because that particular human heart has been perfectly wrapped, with three layers of very sterile gauze, and then placed inside of a sealed-proof plastic container! But here we find just another instance of the inappropriate handling of a human heart!

Spiritually speaking, each one of us can also be found guilty, at times, of the inappropriate handling of a human heart too; whether or that human heart happens to be our own or one that belongs to someone else! Talk about the mishandling of a human heart, St. Luke tells us that Jesus very directly aimed the story he was about to tell, and I quote: *“To some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:8)!*

Therefore, Jesus proceeds to tell us: *“There were two men who went up one day to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector” (v. 10).*

But the great irony found in Jesus’ conclusion to this parable—is that no one who was standing in earshot of Jesus’ words would have ever dreamed, not even for one second, that the “tax collector” would end up being the man in the white hat that day and that the Pharisee would end up being the man in the black hat.

And you know why—**because the word “Pharisee,” meant something totally different to the people, who were listening story for the first time**, than that word “Pharisee” has come to mean to us in our day. Unfortunately, we have become conditioned to believe that all the Pharisees we meet in the pages of the New Testament—were birds of the same feather who quite naturally then, flocked together, which wasn’t really true at all. Yes, some of the Pharisees, maybe even the majority of the Pharisees in our Lord’s Day *“Trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (v. 9)*, but not all of the Pharisees believed that or were like that.

Take Nicodemus, for example, who was a Pharisee but **who also came to Jesus one night with some very honest questions—in a spirit of true humility. His opening words to Jesus are full of respect and admiration, when he starts the conversation by saying to Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (John 3:2)!**

Joseph of Arimathea was also a Pharisee, yet he also risked persecution when he went to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate with the Apostle John—to secure the release of Jesus’ body following his crucifixion that first Good Friday—so that they could give it a proper burial. Unfortunately, many students of the Bible like you and me today are guilty of “stereo-typing” all the Pharisees as all being cut out of the same bolt of cloth, when this probably wasn’t true at all!

**To be fair we have to commend the Pharisees as people who actually took their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob very seriously! They were very much committed to living out their lives in this world as people who were committed to their faith with a complete reliance upon God and his laws.**

**They strived to follow the law of God to a “t.”** By this time their forefathers had combed through the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Old Testament—attributed to the authorship of Moses—with a fine tooth comb—thereby determining that if you were going to live in complete obedience to God’s law that the first things you should know is that there are actually 613 different commandments given to us those first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures that were to be obeyed at all times. They even gave these 613 commandments—a special name—“The Tradition of the Elders.”

**They studied God’s law and talked about God’s law and did their best to keep all of the rules!** Let me tell you that these “Pharisees” were certainly no gang of thugs that we are talking about here. These Pharisees assessed themselves as being completely “righteous” with a capital “R.” And in many of their official teachings they were in complete agreement with what Jesus of Nazareth was teaching his disciples too.

There were times when Jesus certainly butted heads with another group of Jewish people, known as the “Sadducees,” on some pretty important issues. The Sadducees didn’t believe in angels, but Jesus did and the Pharisees agreed with Jesus. They believed in angels too. The Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead, but the Pharisees did, and we know whose side Jesus was on there.

So why is it that the Pharisees always tend to be viewed by us as the bad guys whenever any incidents of their interaction with Jesus—is brought to our attention in the New Testament? Why is it that the Pharisees were so eager to stop Jesus from teaching—that they arranged for his death?

Here’s the problem with the Pharisees. They followed the rules and they wanted everyone else to see that they did! But their problem was actually much more than just a little misplaced pride or spiritual arrogance. They missed the point.

They were the kind of people whom we might refer to today as people who were more focused on “the letter” of the law than they were focused on “the spirit” of the law. The Pharisees followed every letter, but they still managed to completely miss the whole point of God’s commandments; especially his Ten Commandments.

One of the primary goals of God in giving his Ten Commandment to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai **was to teach them and us how to live responsibly in our relationship with him and in our relationships with each other.** The Ten Commandments remind us repeatedly that our merely saying that we love God and saying that we love other people is not enough! Any human being with the ability to speak can say to another “I love you,” but true love is much more than an “emotion” or a “feeling.” True love as St. Paul says to the believers in Rome: **“Does no wrong to its neighbor, for love is the keeping of the law” (Romans 13:8).**

So Jesus tells us: **“Two men who went up to the temple to pray!”** One of them was a Pharisee this Pharisee thought that his prayer should primarily be all about himself. He thought that prayer was just another golden opportunity he had to submit his sterling, spiritual resume to God once again. Therefore, he prayed: *“God, I thank you that I am not like other men: Extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get”* (Luke 18:11-12)! Nevertheless, when this **man openly announces to God and to anyone else who was in earshot of his voice in the temple that day—that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer—this was true.** He didn’t **break into people’s houses or shoplift.** He had never **committed any crime that could get him thrown into jail.** He didn’t **sleep around.** To put it in modern-day terms, **he didn’t even have a traffic ticket.** And to any first-century Jewish observer, there was a **clear difference between him and the tax collector.**

**Tax collectors, on the other hand were collaborators with the Romans who had conquered the Jewish nation** and who accepted the offensive challenge of collecting taxes from their fellow Jews to **support the Roman government.** And the Romans allowed them to collect far more than the government required and then keep the difference. Again and again in the Gospels, we also see them in the company of prostitutes and other notorious sinners.

Still today people will say: **“You are judged by the company you keep!”** Without a doubt, **many tax collectors did plunge and had repeatedly plunged into all kinds of sin.**

By contrast this particular Pharisee avoided all that, but **he gave 10 percent of his income to the Lord,** just like the Old Testament laws commanded. **He fasted twice a week,** though God commanded in the Law of Moses only one fast per year. So it’s pretty easy to see why this man would have become pleased with himself and the kind of man he deemed himself to be! **Jesus’ listeners could have greatly admired him!**

**So what was the problem? It was the pride of his heart. One of the great ironies we learn from the Bible is that even though we might be doing the right things, sometimes we can do the right things for the wrong reason, and if it’s for the wrong reason we are still guilty of sin.** This man was confident of his own righteousness. He thought he was **earning brownie points** with God because of what he was doing. He thought he was **coming out ahead in God’s record book.** But he wasn’t! And why wasn’t he? **Because he ignored everything God said in the Old Testament about every one of us as human beings—needing a new heart; the kind of heart that would teach us to approach God with humility and about being a sinner who is saved by God’s mercy.**

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn’t believe, even for a skinny minute, that he had anything to brag about. His relationship with God was a total mess and he knew it. If he was out to impress God with how holy and righteous his life was, then he didn’t have a leg to stand on. His prayer was not a resume. The tax collector’s prayer wasn’t a resume but a plea: *“God, be merciful to me a sinner”* (v. 13)! It wasn’t his bragging on himself it was his **begging God for mercy**—which if you want the long and the short of it—made his prayer a real prayer.

**The irony in this parable is that the man who thought of himself as a committed, churchgoing follower of God** failed to grasp the meaning of repentance for a new life. But the man who lived a sinful life understood came to understand what it did mean to repent, and in his doing so, he completely threw himself upon God’s mercy. **This man, who humbled himself before God, went home justified.** This tax collector didn’t lie to himself about his righteousness. He understood that the only verdict God’s court could possibly render upon him was guilty. So he threw himself on God’s mercy.

What is mercy? It’s the desire to help someone who’s in trouble. It’s what we feel when we see news reports about cities destroyed by hurricanes, and so we send money to buy blankets and medicine. God has mercy on sinners. He knows that we deserve to die and go to hell, but he loves us and wants us to reach heaven. So he sent his Son to live and die and rise again to wipe away all record of our sin.

No one who clings in faith to Jesus can say, **“I thank you God that I’m not like other people.”** True faith is humble: **“I thank you, God, that you don’t give me what I deserve. I thank you, God, that you have had mercy on me. No one knows better than you how guilty I really am. But you declared me not guilty. You gave me love and forgiveness. For that I thank you, Lord.”**

**One afternoon** a carpet layer had just finished installing carpet for a lady. **He stepped out for a smoke, only to realize that he had lost his cigarettes. After a quick, but fruitless search, he noticed that in the middle of the room, under the carpet that he had just installed, there was a bump. His cigarettes!**

**“No sense pulling up the entire floor for one pack of smokes,”** the carpet layer said to himself so he got out his mallet and flattened the bump! **Not long afterwards, as he was cleaning up and preparing to go home, the woman who owned the house came in and approached him: “Here,” she said, handling him his pack of cigarettes. I found them in the hallway!**

Now,” she said, “if only I could find my parakeet!”

**The point of my little story here is this: Sometimes we know when we’ve made a mistake, when we have committed a sin. Sometimes we don’t. And it’s the mistakes that we make and the sins we commit that we are unaware of that can so often do us the greater harm!**

In a surprising twist, Jesus concludes the parable by saying, *“I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (v. 14)!*

**The tax collector discovers that his relationship with God has been restored by God’s Spirit moving him to repent of his sins, while the Pharisee, perhaps totally unknown to himself, moves further away from God by boasting of his own false sense of “self-righteousness!”**

**This isn’t what the hearers of the parable expected. They had been taught that good behavior draws you closer to God, while bad behavior drives you away. But Jesus is insisting that unless we are aware of our secret faults, and humble enough to know that we need forgiveness, we are going to discover that our minor mistakes can get out of control and destroy us!**

Irony is written all over the gospel. We will explore it more this year during Lent. But Jesus himself illustrated that irony when he spoke this parable. **God cares about your heart. God cares about your faith. No matter how sinful you have been, you will live with him in heaven. Trust him. Admit your guilt to him and cling to his mercy in Christ. Go home today justified—declared not guilty. Amen.**