

A sermon preached on 27th October 2019 at
St. Michael and All Angels Church, Sandhurst by
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May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight; O Lord our strength and our Redeemer

In last week's sermon John Castle explored preserving in prayer looking at the widow and the judge. Our gospel reading today is immediately after this passage and also looks at prayer and worship and our attitudes prayer. In several commentaries and study books these two passages are linked due to their similarities.

Today's sermon is about two groups of people, and no, I'm not talking about Remainers and Leavers! I'm talking about the two groups of people mentioned in our Gospel reading, the Pharisees and the Tax Collectors.

The Pharisees were a socially acceptable group of people. They had chosen their role and it was one where they had committed themselves to studying the Torah and to prayer. The Pharisees often took objection and questioned Jesus, However, there are examples earlier in Luke's gospel where Jesus eats with Pharisees¹.

Tax collectors on the other hand were the total opposite of the Pharisees. They were people who were often Jewish but worked for the Roman authorities and were often seen as collaborators. Their reputation has them collecting more tax than they should, often for their own pockets and were frequently shunned by their family, friends and society, so much so that they were not always welcomed in synagogues. Tax collectors again were not all bad, Jesus calls one of the tax collector to be his disciples. Matthew's original occupation was a tax collector.

Which group of people do you associate with? But I feel I should warn you that not everything is as it seems ...

In this parable, Jesus uses one person from each of these two groups in society to tell the parable and he highlights different characteristics displayed by these two people. As is common, it's not what is on the surface that matters but what is underneath. It is important to note that Jesus does not criticise either the Pharisee or the tax collector in the parable.

¹ Luke 7:36

In the Pharisee, Jesus draws out the characteristics of pride and obedience to at least one of God's laws – that of tithing – giving one tenth² of what they receive. Jesus highlights the actions of the Pharisee where the Pharisee is in the temple, in God's house, but the Pharisee is not focussing on God, instead he is focussing on himself, saying how wonderful he is and grateful he is not like other people.

In the tax collector, Jesus draws out the characteristic of courage and humility. Jesus draws our attention to the action of the tax collector which was the opposite of the Pharisee, The tax collector didn't act as though he should have been there and acknowledged that he was in God's house. The tax collector acknowledged that he had fallen short of God's laws, that he was a sinner, and begged God for mercy. His clear focus was on God.

When the tax collector said that he was a sinner, what did he mean?

A sinner is someone who is self-aware, but is also aware of God's laws and commandments. The laws and commandments that God has given to us to live by. The reason we need to follow God's laws and commandments are not just about obedience to God, but it is the realisation that God wants the best for us both as individuals and as a community; to love and care for both ourselves and others in our community, or as it is put by Jesus "to Love our Neighbour as ourselves", this means caring for others in the world who are often less fortunate than ourselves as well as recognising that God is over everything, this means that he is the creator, so we have a responsibility to care for the environment, When we recognise that we are answerable to God, we realise just how far short from the ideal that God has to us for how we live our lives, and this is why we say we are a sinner.

The tax collector was not unique in being a sinner, we are all sinners. This is why at every communion service and at evensong, we confess our shortcomings before we receive the absolution. Earlier in the service we all confessed that we are sinners and acknowledged that sin can be thoughts, words and deeds, The Book of Common Prayer, states it slightly differently when the language refers to the "devices and desires of our own hearts" and this is at the heart of sin, it is where we have put ourselves above God, turned away from God, been self-centered and not cared for other people or the environment, from the small things such as using a car instead of walking a short distance, or something bigger. This is exactly what the Pharisee did! He forgot that the reason he had gone to the temple was not about him, but was about God. It is easy to "err and stray like lost sheep" (again using Book of Common Prayer language) which is when we walk away, either deliberately or unconsciously from our relationship with God.

However if all this talk of sin is too depressing for you, then there is the second side of the coin, that of Mercy. At the same time that the tax collector admitted his faults and acknowledged that he was a sinner, he also asked God for His mercy.

² Numbers 18:26

Mercy is a frequent term in both the old and new testament. Our old testament reading today was from Joel chapter 2 and earlier in the chapter we have one of the frequent reminders about how merciful God is "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."³ Reminding those who had turned away from God, that God would be merciful.

Mercy is one of those terms that is not often heard or used unless you are in church, so let's take a moment to look at what it is.

Mercy is a legal term and one that is used to define when punishment is with-held, but mercy is not compassion. Compassion is when we feel for people in need of help and want to help them but Mercy is more than compassion. God does show that he is compassionate when he shows Mercy but when he shows Mercy, then he also shows his forgiveness and withholds his punishment.

Mercy is mentioned numerous times in the bible however it is not just limited to the bible. Mercy is not limited only to special people. Mercy is an aspect of God's love for us. Mercy is available to all of us provided we follow the example of the Tax collector, in recognising that we are not worthy of God's mercy, however we admit our faults and ask God for assistance, forgiveness and his mercy. That is when we are the recipients of God's amazing love for us demonstrated through his mercy.

But what does this mean for us? It is all about our attitudes as well and ensuring that we remember that we need to have the attitude of the tax collector. While we think that we may have the attitude of the tax collector when we are here at St. Michael's, that is only a very small part of how we spend our lives, The rest of the time we are at work, at the gym, shopping, spending time with friends and families, do we let God into these areas of our lives. We have an amazing God who loves us and wants us to have a relationship with Him; a relationship where God has given us guidelines to live by.

When we talk with God through prayer is our focus on God or do we come with a shopping list of our needs and concerns? Do we ask God what He wants us to do?

The Pharisee had the characteristics of focussing on himself and his needs and thinking he was more important than others.

The Tax Collector was self-aware, knew his failings and sought God's Mercy as he knew that God was more important

Which one of these people do you identify with now? Which one will you identify with during the week?

³ Joel 2:13

