

Open Hearts, Willing Hands
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Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man 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."

THIS MORNING, JESUS TELLS another parable, and he starts out by saying, "Two men went up to the temple to pray..." which, on one level, is just setting the scene. But on another level, it's telling us something about worship. In Jesus' day, people literally went up to the temple. It sat on the highest point in Jerusalem, overlooking the city, and people had to walk uphill a pretty good distance to get there. So going to worship wasn't easy. You didn't just pop into the temple while you were out running your errands. It was a hike. It was an effort.

Now, we're on a little bit of a hill here at Valley, but it wouldn't matter if we were on top of a mountain because none of us comes here on foot. We all drive. But still, going to church takes effort. We have to get ourselves out of bed. We have to find time in our schedules. We have to arrange our whole day, maybe even our whole weekend, around this one hour. So, getting here isn't easy for us either.

And yet, when we look at the rest of the parable, Jesus seems to be saying that getting here is not even half the battle because worship takes a lot more than just physical

effort. It takes spiritual effort. We need to have an open heart, a humble stance, a willingness to be honest about ourselves. If we don't—if we show up, but we're closed off to this moment—then whatever effort it took to get here is going to be for nothing. We'll sit through the whole service, and when it's over, we won't be any different. We won't be changed in any way.

And isn't that the whole point—or at least a big part of it? Don't we come here week after week because we want to be changed, because we want to become better people, because we want to grow—in faith, in hope, in patience, in joy? And since we're in the middle of stewardship season right now, I'd add one more thing to that list. I'd add generosity. I'd say we come here because we want to grow in how we relate to our money, and our understanding of where God is in that.

So let's look at the parable. Jesus gives us two characters. The first is a Pharisee, a religious leader, an important person. He stands off by himself and says: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." So, you gotta give him credit. He's an impressive guy. He fasts twice

a week—more than what’s required of him—and he gives ten percent of his income, a full tithe. He’s disciplined. He’s devout. He’s generous. But the question is, what’s behind all that piety?

When he prays, he starts off on the right track. He acknowledges God. He says thank you. But he quickly slides into comparing himself to everyone around him. It’s like he’s praying with one eye on God and one eye on his fellow worshippers. His spiritual life is all about competition. It’s about winners and losers. And he clearly sees himself as a winner. All that discipline, all that devotion, all that generosity—it’s just a way for him to show how much better he is than everyone else.

Which is an easy trap to fall into—to live our faith, not out of a simple desire to follow Jesus and do good in the world, but out of a need to prove something. Problem is, that approach has a way of turning us inward and shutting God out, which makes it hard for God to reach us. And if God can’t reach us, God can’t change us.

I can relate to that. When I first started giving to the church as an adult, I did it more because I wanted to be seen as a good person than because I wanted God to come into my life and actually make me a good person. I did it more out of an awareness of how others saw me than as a response to how God loved me. As a result, my giving didn’t make much of a difference to me. It didn’t deepen my faith. It didn’t bring me closer to God. It didn’t make me a better anything. Like the Pharisee, who I’m sure came down from the temple no different than when he went up, I’d go to church, put my offering in the plate, and go home the exact same person—so full of myself there was no room for grace.

Now let’s move on to the other character—the tax collector. In Jesus’ day, tax collectors were hated by everyone. They worked for the Romans, they were seen as collaborators, and they got rich by ripping off their own people. If the Pharisee is at the top of the social ladder, the tax collector is way down at the very bottom.

And he knows it. He stands off by himself, just like the Pharisee. But the difference is, he’s not trying to stay away from all the riff raff. He separates himself out of shame. He doesn’t think

he’s worthy of being around other people. He doesn’t even think he’s worthy of being around God. When he prays, he can’t bring himself to look up. He keeps his eyes down and beats his chest and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

That’s it. No bragging about how wonderful he is. No comparing himself to anyone. Just raw, painful honesty and a deep awareness of his need. And he goes home justified, Jesus says—made right with God—while the Pharisee does not. So apparently there’s not much God can do with impressive displays of piety. But God can work with honesty and humility. God can work with someone who acknowledges the truth about themselves and turns to God in earnest.

And notice something. Notice that Jesus doesn’t say if the man actually changes his ways. He doesn’t say if he comes down from the temple and goes back to his tax booth and starts treating people fairly, instead of charging them more than they owe and pocketing the difference.

I think he probably does. But Jesus leaves it open-ended, maybe as a way of inviting us to think about ourselves. We may come here with open hearts. We may be honest with God about who we are and what we need. And we may feel God’s grace washing over us during the service. But what about when the service is over, and we walk out those doors and go back to our everyday lives? Does any of this actually change us? Does it make us better people? Does it help us grow—in faith, in hope, patience, in joy? And since we’re in the middle of stewardship season right now, let’s add generosity to the list. Do our open hearts translate into willing hands—hands that share what we have with others?

That’s something we can only answer for ourselves. For me, the answer is yes, but it’s been a slow, gradual process. I’ve increased my giving incrementally, over many years.

When I first started getting serious about stewardship and giving faithfully, I had a lot of fear holding me back—fear of not having enough; fear of running out. And honestly, there are times when I still wrestle with that. But every year I’ve tried to stretch myself a little. I’ve tried to up my

pledge, even if it's only by a few dollars. I haven't always been successful. There have been years when I had big expenses—braces for my kids, college tuition, medical bills—and I was so anxious that I actually cut back on my giving.

But over all, despite the setbacks, when I look at the long arc of my personal stewardship journey, I've moved in the right direction—away from fear, away from a mindset of scarcity, toward a way of living that grows out of a sense of God's abundance. And what that journey has taught me is that when I put my trust in God, God always comes through for me. God always provides for my needs. Not my wants, but my needs. I'm still waiting on that winning lottery ticket.

I've also learned that the more I give the easier it gets. Trust replaces fear, and giving feels less and less like a sacrifice, and more and more like freedom. Like joy. Like being part of something bigger than myself.

I think that's what this parable is ultimately about. Going from a life that's focused inward, like the Pharisee, to a life that's focused outward, like the tax collector. And it starts with opening our hearts to God, so God can come in and change us. So, as you think about your own giving this year, I invite you to start with your heart. Don't worry about what other people are doing, and don't let fear drive your decisions. Just open your heart to God. Be honest about who you are and what you need, and God won't let you down, I promise.

Let's pray together:

Gracious God, we've come here this morning, and you've met us in this place. When we go home after the service, go with us. Help us to carry the openness we've practiced here into our daily lives. When fear whispers that there isn't enough, remind us of your abundance. When we're tempted to turn inward, turn us back to you.

Give us courage to take the next step in our giving, whatever that step may be. Transform our open hearts into willing

hands—hands that share what we have with others. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.