

To Be Made Right

Wayne Waibel – 10/23/2022

The temptation to identify with the tax collector in this parable is great. We have a tendency to view the word Pharisee as a verb, which generally translates in opposition to Christ's teaching. And a tax collector is given even less regard owing to their place in first century Palestine, but still – at least he's got the right attitude as he approaches the throne of grace.

What we often discover as we start to peel away the layers of scripture is how brilliant and complex they are. Tiny kernels of truth get magnified and bold statements take on a more reserved tone. The balance we seek as we explore, inform, and live our faith is easily obscured by the elusive nature of postmodern civilization – both random and deliberate.

So we're left to fend for ourselves when it comes to interpretation and appreciation. There are, of course, lessons to both learn and teach, and we strive for a solid foundation on which to build our theology. What can confound and frustrate us is the moving target we encounter when we look to be made right with God.

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We sometimes stand alone, like Paul at his first trial, when we are given an opportunity to testify to the truth of the gospel. While unfortunate, it is nonetheless effective, and I dare say – essential. In speaking truth to power there is a certain poignancy to the tiny little human exhibiting absolute resolve in their conviction. It packs a punch.

And in the case of the tax collector and the Pharisee, it might be helpful to appreciate the context of the times. The audience that Jesus was addressing with this parable doubtless had a huge respect for the Pharisees in general. They were the keepers of the law – they were devout and convicted.

Tax collectors on the other hand were usually corrupt and quite greedy. They worked in collusion with the Roman Empire to gather riches from the conquered people of whom they were most certainly a part. Not only were they despised as collaborators – they were hated for taking advantage of the least able to help themselves.

Into this ancient reality it becomes obvious the difference between these two fellows and the point of the parable. And this is where it becomes perilous to think we grasp the jist of the story. We completely miss the point if after hearing – we pray to ourselves, “Lord – thank you for making me more like the tax collector than the Pharisee.” Where is our humility in that confession? Drawing the line at the arrogance of the Pharisee has put us on a path to self-exaltation – again.

It's a slippery slope when your attempt at humility is based on a comparison between two polar opposites. What often happens in scripture is the rush to judge when you think you've figured something out. That's where grace comes in. Both in how we perceive God and how we relate to the world around us.

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Finding our way to God in gratitude leads us to community and certain satisfaction. Being satisfied is not something we encounter often in a world always intent on having more. The Psalmist reminds us of the many and generous blessings bestowed upon us from a loving God who is well pleased when we have an abundance. All He asks in return is that we seek Him and His glorious ways. We don't even need to earn His grace. He freely gives it.

Still we seem bent on making our lives so much more difficult than they have to be. Certainly more difficult than God ever intended. Next Sunday is celebrated as Reformation Sunday. A point in our collective history that signaled a new way of practicing our faith. Historians also categorize this time in history as the beginning of the modern era.

Despite all of the technological, theoretical, intellectual, philosophical, and theological advancements that have taken place since the Reformation; we still have a hard time choosing between right and wrong – good and evil – efficient and wasteful.

The belching smokestacks of the Industrial Revolution have been replaced by an individual reluctance to serve as caretaker to a planet falling victim to generations of abuse and neglect.

Our tendency toward individual prosperity at the expense of communal harmony has become almost obscene. It's not enough to make ends meet anymore. We have to go beyond that to find satisfaction.

If you adhere to the prevailing narrative – we have passed from the modern era, which extended through the second war to end all wars – through the postmodern era - to land squarely on what social scientists refer to now as the age of enlightenment. Really? We do think a lot of ourselves, don't we? It's high time we are reminded that everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

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For a tiny little three-chapter book, Joel hits hard. The prophetic structure of the book is replete with the promise of salvation for generations of Israelites. In contrast to the vast devastation wrought by nature comes the apocalyptic certainty that God will not abandon His people.

It is a testament to the reality that God comes in the ordinary. The imagery perfectly illustrates one of the most underappreciated aspects to the Old Testament – the small can assist with the large.

There are many qualities to the life and times of Jesus that fill us with awe, and wonder and excitement, but the quality that most personifies the true genius of the man to me is that while He understood the magnitude of His mission to say nothing of the impact His life, ministry, death, and resurrection would have on humankind up to and beyond the present – He still remained humble. Not once did He exalt Himself.

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To grow in gratitude is to become more and more the fulfillment of what God has created us to be. We are headed full tilt into the throes of yet another winter. While it can be a serious challenge to find a healthy outlook in that reality – we somehow manage every year to go into it with a smile on our face. Come mid-January it may be difficult to hear the song in our heart – but it's there – however faint.

When we look back to our predecessors like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli – it's a marvel that any kind of civility emerged from the chaos surrounding the Reformation. Granted – it took nearly three hundred years – and there are still some fairly pronounced schisms, for the most part - hostilities have ceased and we do actually work together on a number of contemporary issues.

As a people of the Reformed tradition we are able if not directed to embrace change. Scriptural influences and interpretations evolve, but the good news remains eternal. He is our God, and we are His people. And as His people, we are totally and utterly dependent on Him for salvation.

I find it affirming to locate that dynamic in the randomness of twenty-first century life as much as learning to uncover it in first century Jerusalem. These moments are at once illuminating and wonderful – which is to say – full of wonder.

Like the tax collector who was able only to ask for mercy. Or the small-town church that presented a community with immeasurable joy when the intent was merely to provide a little fellowship. Or the Messiah who chose humility over exaltation, and as a result – saved the world. Amen.