

## Gratitude and grace

Are you blessed? Do you thank God for those blessings? What do you think about people who don't have the blessings you have?

When I hear today's parable, my reflex reaction is to think 'Boy, I'm glad I'm not like the Pharisee'.

Or at least I'm not like the Pharisee most of the time. I try hard not to be arrogant, judgemental, legalistic and self-righteous.

It's easier, I find, to compare myself to the Pharisee than to the tax collector of the parable. We can list the Pharisee's faults, can't we, and be able to find at least one or two that are not ours ... and so we can feel pretty good *compared to the Pharisee*.

But the tax collector is simply humble and he prays 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. How do we go, compared to the tax collector? How humble are we? How often do we ask for God's mercy because we're sinners?

Clearly though, the Pharisee is the bad guy of the parable, and the Tax Collector the good. If we do a quick self evaluation, it's really easy to come to the conclusion "*Boy, I'm glad I'm not like the Pharisee*".

But if we do that, aren't we being just a bit like the Pharisee?

The Pharisee in this parable was a good person. As a Pharisee he was blessed – he was educated, he held an important position in society, and he would have been generally respected.

Beyond those things, which we would expect of all the Pharisees, this one, in his prayer, thanks God he is not a robber, an evildoer, an adulterer or a tax collector. He fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all he gets. So he lists some sins he doesn't commit, and then gives some examples of his piety.

He's a good person. He does the right thing – he follows the law. In fact, he does even more than the law requires.

The law required fasting only on one day, not twice a week, and he gave a tenth of everything, even though the law (Deuteronomy 14:22 & 11:42) allowed for some exceptions to the 'give a tenth' rule. The Pharisee, in modern terms, 'exceeds expectations' as a Jewish follower of God.

He was blessed. And he thanked God for those blessings.

That's what we who are blessed in 21<sup>st</sup> century St Ives and surrounds would say we should do, as well: Recognise the blessings that we have received and thank God for them.

And yet the Pharisee is the bad guy in this parable.

And the good guy is the tax collector - he went home justified before God

The example of the tax collector, like the Pharisee, would have been familiar to Jesus' original listeners. Jesus used characters that his listeners could identify with and relate to.

From what's in this short parable, we know even less about the tax collector than we do about the Pharisee. But tax collectors were outcasts in Judean society - they collected taxes, and passed those taxes back through a system, with each person taking his cut before passing the remainder to the next in the system, all the way to Rome.

And tax collectors had a reputation for taking a bit more than they were entitled to.

But even worse than just the financial aspect, tax collectors weren't just working for the Romans, but they'd sold out to them – they were collaborating with them – so they weren't just regarded as thieves, but also as traitors to their own people.

So this man who would go home justified before God was someone who took peoples money, acted dishonestly, and was a traitor to his own people.

We're not like that, are we? And we wouldn't like to be thought of like that, would we?

What's wrong with the picture that Jesus gives us, then? We have a Pharisee who's a good person, who does good things and follows the law... and a tax collector who's a bad person, does bad things, and breaks the Jewish law. What is the problem? The tax collector being justified doesn't seem fair.

The Pharisee thanks God, but he doesn't thank God for the blessings he has, instead he turns it into comparison: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector."

He could have prayed so many other things. He could have thanked God for his position or his wealth. For that matter he could have prayed that the robbers, evildoers, adulterers and tax collectors would turn from their ways.

Instead, he boasted. "I'm not like them". I think that's an easy thing for us all to do – to fall into the habit of telling ourselves that we're better than 'them' – whoever the 'them' may be. I've heard it described as 'lifting ourselves up, by pushing others down'.

The tax collector of the parable makes no comparison – nor any judgement. Instead, he comes to the temple, stands at a distance, and humbles himself before God. “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” he prays.

He shows no pride in his attitude, makes no comparison, recognizes his own failings – and makes no excuse for them – and asks for mercy. What a model of prayer for us!

But do we like to follow the tax collector’s example?

It’s much easier to make a comparison with the Pharisee – after all, we’re Australians, we don’t like tall poppies, we don’t like people strutting about big noting themselves, do we?

But if we start comparing ourselves to the Pharisee, if we come to the conclusion that we’re better than him, then we’re just making the same mistake the Pharisee did.

If we get down to it, don’t we all think - at least sometimes - that God is quite lucky to have followers like us? We’re good people, we have well-structured worship, we support good causes, we encourage each other, we have good hymns.... We’re not like some other churches, are we?

Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans (3:23), "...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". The Tax Collector had done bad things and fallen short of the glory of God, but the Pharisee had done good, pious things but had also fallen short of the glory of God. They had both, in their lives, fallen short of the glory of God. But as Jesus tells us elsewhere (Mark 9:13), he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

And at this point it’s interesting to note who Jesus was addressing when he told this parable – it wasn’t his disciples and nor was it a huge crowd – the usual audiences we expect in the gospels, but verse 9 tells us, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable”. This was not subtle.

His audience was confident of their own righteousness, just like the Pharisee of the parable... but Jesus was telling them that they weren’t justified before God. Just being – or claiming to be – better than others was not what is important.

As Paul says, “There is no one righteous, not even one...” (Rom 3:10, quoting Psalm 143 (David)).

This was not subtle at all.

“You’re confident of your righteousness?” he said to his listeners back then, “Well listen to this.” And that’s just how Jesus’ word comes to us today – if we’re

confident of our own righteousness, if we're confident because we're better than others, then we need to listen to this too.

In fact, when you think about it, whenever we start comparing ourselves to others, we're being like the Pharisee. The tax collector made no comparisons – he just was humble and honest in his prayer.

But it's is such an easy thing to do, a very human thing: It doesn't matter how good or bad we are, as long as we can assure ourselves that we're better than someone else we can make ourselves feel better.

Did you claim few hundred dollars of dubious tax deductions? Not really so bad because some people cheat by thousands – or millions.

Sure, we might be relatively better than some others, but we're never absolutely good through our own efforts.

So, if we understand that we shouldn't be like the Pharisee, and even by judging him we're falling into the trap of being like him, what should we do? Should we aim to come to church and be humble – keep our offertory secret so others don't see how very generous we are, not singing too loudly and try not to boast about how frequently we pray?

These might well be good things to do, of course, but if they are, they're good things on their own. Doing these things doesn't make us justified before God – because doing these things doesn't make us humble, they are simply what humble people do.

I think there are circumstances where it's appropriate to point out others wrongdoing – but in doing that we should never be congratulating ourselves. Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine – that was objectively bad... but pointing it out doesn't make us good.

We are blessed to live in Australia. And if we compare Australia with other places in the world, it almost always comes out on top. We can say the Australian political system is better than the American one – but we shouldn't be saying we are better than Americans.

We can know that St Ives and surrounds is a very safe place to live... but that doesn't mean that people who live in Merrylands or Macquarie Fields or wherever are bad. We are blessed and we should be thankful for the blessings we have – and we should also be prepared to share those blessings. And as we show our gratitude, let's do it graciously.

From verse 14, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and

those who humble themselves will be exalted". In Jesus summation, what matters is who exalted himself and who humbled himself.

The Pharisee did the right things – the rest of the time – and the tax collector did the wrong thing – the rest of the time. But in their prayers, the Pharisee was wrong and the tax collector was right. And we should note that the Pharisee's response was wrong and the tax collector's response was right - the Tax Collector's response was *not merely better* than the Pharisee's – it was - absolutely - the correct response.

Jesus isn't condemning the other actions of the Pharisee – the refraining from robbery, evildoing and adultery, or fasting and tithing. And neither is he saying the actions – the lifestyle – of the tax collector are acceptable.

We read of Matthew, who was a tax collector, being called (Matt 9:9) to follow Jesus... he was sitting in his tax booth by the side of the road, when Jesus came to him and said "Follow me" he got up and followed him, leaving the tax collection behind.

In the next chapter of Luke's gospel, we read of Zaccheus, another tax collector, who, when he turned to follow Jesus gave half his possessions to the poor; and returned four times what he had gained through cheating.

God's grace in Christ meets us wherever we are, no matter how bad we are – or how bad we think we are – but God's grace is not content to let us remain there.

We mustn't confuse our response to grace, the right response to grace, with what is needed to experience that grace. Because what is needed is only faith in Jesus – which leads to humility before God.

We need to avoid thinking of how good we are – particularly how good we are compared to others. We need to respond properly to God's grace. To be obedient to God and to be his faithful servants.

The Pharisee had done what was required and more. But he was boastful. He was confident in his own goodness. He was grateful to God, but he wasn't gracious to others.

And no matter how good and faithful we are to God, no matter how sound our theology, how well structured our worship is, how generous we are with our money and time, how much we help the poor and oppressed, how much we encourage each other, how glorious our music is... we have only done our duty.

Those things are good. But even those good things can draw us away from being humble before God. People can become obsessed with good causes.

But they're not things to boast about. As we will sing in our next hymn 'Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God; all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.'

We can be thankful for the blessings that we have, but we must also be humble and gracious in our thanksgiving.

And as when pray, will our prayer be the Pharisee's "God, I thank you that I am not like others!" or will it be the tax collector's "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Amen.