

SERIES: THE PERSON OF CHRIST #5/7

THE HEART OF JESUS

March 21, 2010

Text: Luke 18:9-17

The Reverend Alan Wilkerson shares this experience about social acceptance: “One evening in our youth group, a new boy appeared. He looked like the typical ‘nerd’ or ‘geek.’ The too-short pants, glasses, and gawky appearance made him stand out in our upper-middle-class group. He told us he’d just moved there and was interested in a church group. Our study revolved around the passage in James about not showing partiality to someone on account of outward wealth. Just before the group was ready to dismiss, our nerdy visitor revealed that he was actually a local high school’s football quarterback and president of the student body. I had cooked this up with his pastor in a neighboring town as an illustration of James. What’s more, he said that only three out of the 20 people there had spoken with him for more than [a few minutes]. When we debriefed about this, it was amazing to hear the excuses flow. And yet I had a sneaky suspicion that I was listening to the youth’s parents as well as to themselves. This person did more than prove a point; he brought to the surface of ‘good church kids’ all the hidden prejudices, self-righteousness, and justifications they had heard from their parents and thought of on their own.” (Alan Wilkerson, “Who Is Our Neighbor?” 50-Day Spiritual Adventure implementation manual 2000, p. C.97)

It’s not fun to be set up, is it? Things like that tend to catch us with our guard down and reveal something about our real selves and inner character. But that’s the heart of the matter that Jesus was trying to get across in his story recorded by Luke. When it comes to our faith and life in Jesus Christ, our inner character is supposed to match our outward appearance. It’s called integrity. Acting righteous on the outside does no good at all if we are not righteous on the inside. Besides, our outward righteous appearance will always be shattered whenever an event happens that causes us to drop our guard for a moment.

The set up verse in this parable is verse 9. I have looked it up in a variety of versions, and it reads about the same in them all: the Jerusalem Bible, for instance, reads, “He spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else.” Unless they already knew Jesus well enough to know they were about to be put on the spot again, some of those around Jesus were no doubt ready to hear a story about how good they were acting. Instead, the Pharisees

and those like them were made the target instead of the heroes.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” Jesus picks for his characters a study in opposites. To be a Pharisee meant to be one interested in the most righteous and pure elements of their religion. Among other things, the Pharisee gave a tenth of his income to charity and religion; he imposed disciplines upon himself in excess of the law’s requirements. He was rigorous in fasting, prayer and worship. Nothing wrong with any of these. Such disciplines were hardly unnoticed by God. It was Jesus who reminded us in Matthew 5:20, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The tax collector, on the other hand, could not have been a better opposite. He was a scoundrel, a traitor, and a thug. Most tax collectors then bought into the position by paying a certain amount in advance and then, armed with the official title, would make collections so as to make a profit. The Hebrew men who engaged in this profession were guilty of treason, as far as any upstanding, righteous member of the Jewish community was concerned. Some Jewish extremists even asserted that any act of submission to Caesar, such as paying taxes, was treason to God. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* tells us that “the Jews who for pay participated in these operations were therefore regarded as doubly base and despicable. They had sold their services to the foreign oppressor as against their own people, and they were engaged in literal robbery.... the gospels speak repeatedly of ‘tax collectors and sinners;’ tax collectors are classified with prostitutes as flagrant offenders against morality.” (B. J. Bamberger, “Tax Collector,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, 1962, p. 522) Like Oscar Madison and Felix Unger of *The Odd Couple*, a more opposite pair could hardly have been found.

Jesus quickly lets us know, though, that their roles are reversed in his parable. The Pharisee “thanked” God, but his thoughts were on himself. He was full of himself. In effect, Jesus is telling us that the prayer went something like this: “Look at me, God. Looky, looky, looky at all the things I do for you! I don’t smoke, drink, cuss, or chew, nor go out with the women that do. [I had to throw that in] I tithe; I pray; I fast; I go to church. I’m not at all like the robbers, evildoers, and adulterers. I’m not like that tax collector over there at all!” The tax collector, on the other hand, could not even look up to heaven - he dared not try to get a glimpse of the holy God - but beat his breast in agonized grief and wept out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus ended the parable pointedly, “I tell you that [the tax collector] rather than [the Pharisee] went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus knew his Scriptures and his heritage, didn’t he? Oh yes, he did. He knew that once His Father settled His chosen people into the Promised Land, God directed them to live humbly before Him and to treat the poor, the dispossessed, and the foreigner with compassion. They were to be living witnesses to the living God by their

lives of compassion, humility, and love. They didn't do that. Instead, they frequently became conceited, arrogant, and rebellious. They practiced injustice instead of justice; hatred instead of love; and idolatry instead of Godly worship. Like Adam and Eve, they lost paradise because of their disobedience. Jesus knew what the prophet Micah wrote in 6:6-8: "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." We can see who God justified in Jesus' parable.

Sadly, it is still easy to categorize and talk about people in certain ways. There are transients and migrant workers. There are "trailer court people." Thank God we're not like "those people," right? According to Jesus, not right. According to Jesus, whether we're "church people" or "trailer court people," we had better be praying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." God justifies those who humble themselves before Him. He also empowers those who humble themselves before Him. I mentioned a situation with two of our bus stop students as a prayer concern. The latest I know is that they are in child protective custody because their mother and her boyfriend were arrested for drugs. The whole situation is unnecessarily sad, and it breaks my heart. Now I do not suggest this morning that anyone here abuse drugs of any kind. I do not suggest that anyone engage in a dysfunctional relationship. I do not suggest that anyone ignore the claims of God on his or her life. But, if God sends us the opportunity to minister to those students and/or the family, we had never be saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men." We can be a Christian witness only when we plead, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Bruce Marchiano is the actor who portrayed Jesus in *The Visual Bible* video series on the Gospel according to Matthew. Some of us heard him speak at McGrawsville UMC a few years ago. As you can imagine, it is quite an awesome and mind-boggling task for an actor to portray Jesus. Think about it! If you were being cast in the role of Jesus, how would you do it? How would you prepare for it? How could you get yourself in the right frame of mind to literally step into the footsteps of Jesus? As actors and actresses will tell you, in order to be successful, they must "become" the person they are portraying. How would you "become" Jesus?

Well, first, it could not be done without a lot of prayer. Bruce did pray a lot. From that prayer, Bruce shared that it dawned on him that the only way he could portray Jesus the best way he knew how was to deal with each and every person he encountered as if that person was his personal child. What a touching testimony. When Bruce would see others with the "heart of Jesus," he would literally see and relate with a son or a daughter - his son or his daughter. There was no "me" or "them" and no "us" or "them." There were no "Pharisees" or "tax collectors." There were no "church people" or "trailer court people." There were no "insiders" or "outsiders." There were

only children; *his* children; the children for whom the parent would do anything to protect and save. There was unspeakable joy when his child received the healing he offered and unspeakable heartbreak when his child rejected the salvation he offered.

That's why I went ahead and included the Scripture following the parable. They deal with the necessity to receive Jesus Christ like a child - with humility, with awe, and with absolute trust. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Jesus' words, not mine. The heart of Jesus.

Does this make us a little uncomfortable, maybe? It does me. Jesus wants me to accept him with a simple trust that leads me to treat others like I would have him treat me. How does Jesus treat me? With compassion, patience, mercy, and love. How am I to treat others? Not like the self-righteous Pharisee, that's for certain. Instead, with compassion, patience, mercy, and love.

I have a file folder among my many file folders that contains "lessons learned" from times that I have been "ripped off" by strangers seeking help from a pastor and church. The purpose of my notes is to help me figure out how I can determine whether someone is telling me the truth about their needs or whether he is just playing a con game. For instance, not long after coming here, I received a call from someone who said he was from this area and was broken down in Florida. He needed money for a bus ticket to get his wife, child, and himself back here. I didn't give in quickly, but he was persistent and called back. I knew as soon as I wired money that I had been swindled. I prayed that this con man's conscience would be pricked along the way somewhere, and that he would come to know Jesus as Lord instead of just a prop with which to rip off pastors and churches, but I'll never know whether that happens or not. Anyway, I wrote more notes to myself about questions to ask and people to contact if another similar situation arises. It is Biblical to test another person's words and testimony. There is no Biblical mandate to be swindled. But you know what? Somewhere down the line, I'm probably going to fall for some con game again. It's not because I'm not smart enough to figure it out, or that I don't have any interest in protecting myself and my family. It's because I keep hearing the questions "what would Jesus do?" and "how would Jesus respond?" Jesus saw his son and his daughter through his eyes and acted with that kind of compassion. For all I know, Jesus could have been "ripped off" at times by those he helped, too. After all, nine out of ten healed lepers didn't think to come back to thank him. Maybe some other folks he healed didn't turn out to live like Jesus intended. We don't know. But, apparently, that was not Jesus' concern when it came to the choice of dealing with his children compassionately.

Ultimately, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is about how we present ourselves to God. Even though we can take anything to God in prayer, we need to remember that prayer is far less about us changing the mind of God and far more about God changing us. When we are open enough to allow God to change our

hearts, minds, and lives, then we can begin seeing those in our world through the heart of Jesus.

Mother Teresa visited Phoenix, Arizona, in 1989 to open a home for the destitute. During that brief visit, she was interviewed by a radio personality on the largest radio station in town. In a private moment, the announcer asked Mother Teresa if there was anything he could do for her. He was expecting her to request a contribution or media help to raise money for the new home for the impoverished in Phoenix. Instead, she replied, "Yes, there is. Find somebody nobody else loves, and love them." It is appropriate for us to fund ministries. It is Biblical. But it can also cause us to forget to actually act like Jesus. "Find somebody nobody else loves, and love them." Jesus certainly did that. Referring just a moment to his human nature alone, he probably did that more times in the three years of his public ministry than most of us do in an entire lifetime. "Find somebody nobody else loves, and love them." That is the heart of Jesus.

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." In one short, easy-to-understand sentence, Jesus tells us exactly how God endows us with His righteousness. He loves us so much that He gave His only Son to save us from the penalty of our sin. That is what we need to keep before us throughout the remainder of this Lenten season. And, because of that, we cry out to Him, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Let us live our lives through the heart of Jesus.

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