

I recall a portion of a sermon from several years ago where the speakers said something like: “When you are walking down a dark street at night and you hear footsteps behind you, you should not be concerned about the color of their skin but by the condition of their heart!” In a day when we place so much emphasis on externals we need to look deeper in the heart. In I Samuel 16:7b, Samuel is seeking to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as the new king. As he examines each God says, *“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”*

As Jesus continues his teaching on prayer he shared another parable with his followers. A parable that deals not only with prayer but with the inward condition of the heart. It was the time for the prayer which occurred during the morning and afternoon sacrifice. Remember Zechariah was burning incense in Temple when the angel approached him during morning or afternoon prayers. This was the time when the smoke from the incense filled the Temple and the prayers of the people were lifted up to God: a powerful image, prayers floating heavenward as the smoke leaves the Temple. The lamb had been sacrificed - the atonement sacrifice had been given.

Two men pray. Both are standing away from the group of worshippers. One was a Pharisee. A pious man who would be honored by the people for his piety. He would stand apart because he would be afraid of touching someone unclean. If he did he would be made unclean. It is important that he remain clean, aloof and apart. Everyone would know him. Maybe his dress, robes and its fringes may bring attention to his importance. And, for him it was important that everyone know how religious he is.

The other, a tax-collector, would almost be shunned by the worshipping community. They would wonder why he was there. Ken Bailey points out that at this point in the service many would feel he should have been escorted out (p. 149). This was a sacred moment and certainly not one for tax-collectors or sinners. The Pharisee may have wondered why he was still there. (Today, some congregations still ask non-members to leave at the Communion service.)

Both men pray. The Pharisee lifts his eyes to heaven and tells God how great he is. Most understand that this was not really praying but sermonizing. He was telling those who were listening how great he was. Some translations even have him praying to himself! This mini-sermon was directed to those gathered, not God. He wanted them to see how much better he was than they were and certainly how much better than this tax-collector and robbers, evil doers, adulterers, etc. Wow! If you want to see greatness look at me.

The tax-collector does not lift his hands to heaven but crosses them over his breast and beats his breasts with his fists. The pounding of the chest was usually only done by women in extreme grief. For a man to do it in public was a sign of extreme sorrow and remorse. He will not even lift up his eyes to heaven. He prays for forgiveness, that the lamb just sacrificed might be for his sins and shortcomings. “Let it be for me! Make atonement for a sinner” (p.154). He knows his need and asks for atonement.

Jesus says that only one of them left the service “justified”. Most in the crowd would have assumed it would be the Pharisee, the good man. The pious one. However, Jesus points to the tax-collector. The one who was humbled before God and who knew his only hope was in the sacrifice, the atonement for his sins. The one who understands the true meaning of the lamb, the gift of God.

The story also has another dimension for me, What do we see? Who do we see? Which one would we consider worthy? Would we lift up the Pharisee, the one God seems to have blessed-at least in his own eyes. Many still believe that wealth is an indication of God’s blessing. We honor those who gain riches, fame, beauty and don’t generally concern ourselves with how they got them. We honor outward beauty (if not, why do we spend so much on beauty treatments?). We know that taller people are more likely to be hired than shorter ones. Several years ago an ad for a pastor in one of the major religious magazines wanted one who would look good on television. They had a weekly TV program and the successful candidate had to have a good image on the screen. Outward beauty is far more important than inner qualities.

Jesus turns the table on the expected. The one who is lifted up and justified was the tax-collector, the sinner. Take a few moments to look at the ones Jesus called to be “disciples”. They were not the Pharisees but the tax-collectors, the fishermen, the revolutionaries (Sons of Thunder). There was even one who would betray him. None of them would be on our pastoral search list or seen as righteous in the eyes of the Pharisee praying in the Temple. It would be this “bunch of sinners” who would understand the sacrifice of the Lamb and who would change the world.

Philip Yancey in his book, I Was Just Wondering notes:

In our churches, why not spend more time discussing the implications of Jesus’ parable of the righteous man and the tax collector? One man thanked God for his blessings, that he was not a robber, evil doer, adulterer, or tax collector. He fasted twice a week and tithed his income. The other had an indefensible morality, not much in the way of a resume, and a thoroughly inadequate theology. One prayed eloquently; the other said seven simple words, “God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Yet which one went home justified?

Curiously, the righteous Pharisees had little historical impact, save for a brief time in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. But Jesus’ disciples—an ornery, undependable, and hopelessly flawed group of men — became drunk with the power of a gospel that offered free forgiveness to the worst sinners and traitors. Those men managed to change the world. (p. 101)

We need to look beyond the externals. A friend of ours had a handicap placard for her car. She did not look like she needed one. She had spent most of her life as a guard in a woman’s prison and could “hold her own”. People would openly wonder how she dare park there, but her heart function was at only twenty per cent. Even though she looked able, she was dying. She could only go little distances before tiring.

An email from a cousin a few months back asked, “Which of the following are you familiar with? Angelia Jolie, Brad Pitt, Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, Jorge Bergoglio, Winnie Mandella, Vladimir Putin, Kim Kardashin, Russell Wilson, Tiger Woods. Was there one in there that had you wonder, ‘Who is this?’ — Jorge Bergoglio. He ended with, “You know all the ones lifted up by society but you don’t know the Pope.”

Joel says there is coming a day when the Spirit will be poured out on all people. Your sons and daughters. The old and the young. Slaves and free. There will be no distinction on those upon whom the spirit falls. God will surprise us — God always does!

What/who do you see?

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NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985

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