

The Good, the Bad, and the Justified

The famous actor Gregory Peck was once standing in line with a friend, waiting for a table in a crowded Los Angeles restaurant. They had been waiting for some time, the diners seemed to be taking their time eating and new tables weren't opening up very fast. They weren't even that close to the front of the line. Peck's friend became impatient, and he said to Gregory Peck, "Why don't you tell the maitre d' who you are?" Gregory Peck responded with great wisdom. "No," he said, "if you have to tell them who you are, then you aren't."

That's a lesson that the Pharisee in our gospel reading apparently had never learned. His prayer, if it can be called that, is largely an advertisement for himself. He's selling himself to God. Little wonder that Luke describes him in the way he does, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." That's a very apt description, isn't it -- he prayed with himself. He would have done better had he had Gregory Peck there to whisper in his ear that if he had to remind God who he was, then he wasn't.

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn't have to tell God who he was. He knew who he was and he knew that God knew who he was. His prayer is not an exercise in self-promotion, but a confession and a plea for mercy. He is not selling himself, but opening himself. And Jesus says, "It is this man who went home justified." To be justified means to be declared "not guilty." It means to be declared right. The tax collector is **declared to be in the right relationship to God** while the Pharisee, who is so certain of his own righteousness, is shown to be in the **wrong relationship with God**. He is not justified before the bar of God's justice which is the court of ultimate consequence.

We hasten to add, however, that this does not mean that the Pharisee was a bad person and the tax collector really a good person. There's no suggestion of that in this parable. The Pharisee was probably every bit as good and moral and generous as he claimed to be. When he gives that little speech about how he fasts and tithes and gives alms and prays frequently, he's not guilty of false advertising. There's no suggestion that he's a hypocrite -- pretending to be something he isn't. In fact, the Pharisees enjoyed great respect among the people of Israel because of the high standards of their morality, their ethics, and their piety.

Nor is there any suggestion that the tax collector was really a good guy at heart --

something akin to the Hollywood version of the prostitute with the heart of gold or the thief who robs only from the rich in order to give to the poor. The tax collector was very likely every bit as bad as his reputation made him out to be.

If he hadn't been crooked, he wouldn't have been a tax collector in the first place, for the Romans couldn't get honest people to be their lackeys. The only people who would serve as tax collectors were people who were interested in enriching themselves with little concern for how they did it.

The contrast in the parable is not between the real, but hidden, goodness of the tax collector and the real, but hidden, hypocrisy of the Pharisee. Such a construction misses the point. If that were the case, it would not be at all hard to understand why it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who is declared to be righteous and who goes home justified.

No, this parable is much more radical than that, and it is so because the gospel is radical. It goes to the root of the problem of human sinfulness and alienation from God. The gospel that Jesus proclaims in this parable is radical in at least three aspects.

1. The Parable Tells Us God Knows Us As We Really Are.
2. The Parable Tells Us God Accepts Us as We Are.
3. Although God Accepts Us As We Are, He Never Leaves Us As We Are.

A city boy visited his cousin who lived on a farm in the country for the first time. The city boy had never seen wheat growing in a field. It was an impressive sight for him, the wheat golden brown and ready for harvesting. He noticed that some of the wheat stood tall in the field, whereas some of it was bent low, touching the ground. The city boy said to his cousin, "I bet the ones standing tall are the best ones, aren't they?"

His cousin smiled knowingly and reached over and plucked the head of one of the tall-standing wheat stalks and one that was bent to the ground. He rubbed each of them and the city boy saw that the tall one was almost empty of seeds. But the one bent to the ground was full of the promise of a rich harvest.

(by R. Curtis Fussell from *Deadly Sins and Living Virtues*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.)