

**Title:** Stories on the Way to the Cross: Sinners

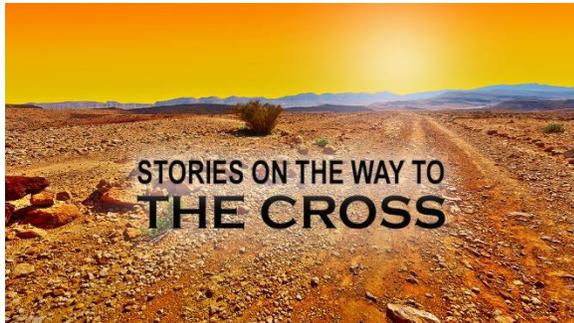
**Date:** February 26, 2020 – Ash Wednesday

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Psalm 51:1-12](#)

**Text:** [Luke 18:9-14](#)

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We are starting ahead of ourselves. I'll confess it and should since this service and day is all about confession. The lesson I just read, on this day when we begin the journey to Jerusalem, is out of place. It's not out of place in terms of content. Rather, it is out of place in terms of timeline. It takes place closer to Jerusalem, later in Jesus' journey to

the cross. I'm jumping ahead. Let me explain and prepare you for the next seven weeks of looking at the words of Jesus.

Jesus, as far as we know it, never wrote a word. That may seem odd given the fact that we pour over his words in Bible study. But so far as anyone has ever been able to determine, Jesus didn't write. He spoke. His words got written down and for that we are grateful.

Some of what he spoke was preaching. Preaching is a proclamation and Mark says that Jesus began his ministry "proclaiming the Good News...the kingdom of God has come near." (Mark 1:15).

Some of what Jesus said was teaching. He does this often in the company of disciples. The Sermon on the Mount is a great example, a little book of proverbs in and of itself within the gospel of Matthew.

There is a third way Jesus spoke and we see it most often in Luke. He told stories. When "Jesus announces to his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to be crucified, and he calls them to go with him. As they walk together those several days, he prepares them for what is to come." He does so with stories. <sup>1</sup>

During this ten-chapter travel narrative from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus tells fourteen parables, ten of which are unique and found only in Luke. He doesn't stop teaching and preaching. It's still there but center-stage is Jesus' short stories, his parables; they lead them to the cross. They will lead us as

well. During our Lenten journey, we will let Jesus' stories prepare us for the cross and empty tomb.

The first story in Luke's travel narrative is familiar, perhaps one of the most familiar. Appropriately, Jesus and his disciples are travel through Samaria and the first story features a Samaritan, the Good Samaritan. But that's not the story we are going to look at. It is in the queue for Sunday, with the title The Neighbor.

As I confessed, because it is Ash Wednesday, I'm jumping ahead to the **only** story that takes place in a church. That may surprise you but the truth is this: parables by their nature, use the informal give-and-take language that takes place in our ordinary lives. They are designed to reveal the truth for daily living.

But our parable today takes place in a church, the temple. As you heard, two men go to church to pray. They should get credit for this just as you should get credit for making it to an Ash Wednesday service. They are there to pray which is a good reason for going to church. Sometimes our reasons for going to church aren't that good. I don't mean to suggest that your motives aren't pure. Again, I've offered credit that you made it to this service. But credit isn't what this service should be about even if it is, in part what the parable is about.

So back to the story Jesus tells on the way to the cross. The two men who went up to the temple to pray have identities. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Because you are here, you've been around the church block a few times. That means that when you hear this story, you start with a bias. You hear the word "Pharisee" and you think, well I know who the bad guy is. He's the villain because let's face it, Pharisees have a bad rap in church. So if you have a story that starts, "There were two men ... one of them was a Pharisee," you don't even have to get to the end of the story to know who the hero isn't. The story could go "there were two guys, one of them a Pharisee and the other an ax murderer," and you'd know that in the end, somehow, the ax murderer is going to turn out to be the good guy. Sure, he might be a crazed killer, but at least he's not a Pharisee. Pharisees, to our ears, are worse than everybody. But that's not how it sounded to those hearing Jesus tell this short story on his way to the cross.

Pharisees were highly respected people because they did everything right. They kept all of the commandments, not just the ten but a whopping 613 commandments. They went all out to do everything God asked them to do and then, they went a little further so they didn't accidentally break God's law. So, the Bible says not to take God's name in vain. The Pharisees made

sure that they never did, not even accidentally. They didn't want to come close to breaking God's law, so they didn't say God's name at all. They studied God's law and talked about God's law and kept all the rules.

The Pharisees are not some evil gang of thugs we're talking about here. The Pharisees were righteous with a capital RIGHT. Jesus butted heads with another group, the Sadducees, on some pretty important issues. The Sadducees didn't believe in angels. Jesus did. The Pharisees agreed with Jesus. The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees did (and we know whose side Jesus was on there). So why is it that the Pharisees are always the bad guys when Jesus tells his little parables? <sup>2</sup>

There was the problem with some Pharisees, something Jesus points on his way to the cross. Some Pharisees, like the one in the story, were good people and they knew it. They followed the rules and wanted everyone else to see how well they did. But their problem was more than just a little misplaced pride or spiritual arrogance. They missed the point. You know what they say about the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. The Pharisees followed every letter, but they still managed to completely miss the whole point. They had a spiritual practice, a routine, but it didn't make them more connected to God. They were more interested in the appearance of their faith than the substance of it.

I think this is the reason Jesus tells the story because one can easily think, "I've got this covered." You can believe that you know what it is like to lead a spiritual life and by doing the right things, you are spiritually wise. But in fact, you are spiritually blind. You can't see yourself.

There is a name for this in the field of psychology. It's called the Dunning-Kruger effect. It is a cognitive bias in which someone overestimates his knowledge or ability. It is the illusion that you are smarter or more talented than you are because you cannot recognize your lack of ability. Or to put it more bluntly, it's when you are too stupid to know how stupid you are. <sup>3</sup>

There is something like this going on in this parable. We are quick to look at the Pharisees and laugh, seeing the Pharisee publicly parading his spiritually, showing how confident he was to look God in the eye. Because he lived such a virtuous life, because he kept all of the laws, he had it covered. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." (Luke 18:11-12). He credentials himself at first negatively, showing he is keeping the law, and his positive record is impressive, fasting more than what was required. Those listening to Jesus would have nodded

in appreciation for what he saying about himself. They wouldn't think he was comedic. This was a good guy. This guy has got it, except of course he doesn't.

He doesn't have it because he thought that prayer was a chance to submit his résumé to God. It was not so much praying as it was bragging. It was all about who he was, not whose he was. It was about who he was to God, not who God was to him. Like the Dunning-Kruger effect, he was too spiritually wise to realize he was spiritually blind. The Pharisee's relationship with God was a total mess, and he had no idea he was a sinner.

But the other man knew he was a sinner and everyone else did too. Tax collectors were collaborators with Rome and were often crooked, taking advantage of people. They played a key role in the world of moral values by being someone everyone else could look down on. You know, you always need someone to point to and say, "Well, I'm may have my faults but at least I'm not as that one." <sup>4</sup>

At least in this story, this tax collector knew who he was and knew that his relationship with God was a mess. He wasn't trying to impress God or anyone else about how holy and righteous his life was. The tax collector's prayer wasn't a resume; it was a plea. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (v. 13).

It appears he was reciting Psalm 51, which was read earlier in service. We read it every year. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions" (Psalm 51:1). It was an Ash Wednesday prayer 2000 years before this Ash Wednesday service. It wasn't bragging, it was begging. Which is to say, it was a real prayer. The tax collector was a sinner and he knew it and was honest enough to confess and petition for mercy. His purpose wasn't recognition by God but reconciliation with God. And Jesus says that it's exactly what he got. To the surprise if not shock of those listening to Jesus, he says, "I want to tell you that this tax collector went home justified. Right with God. The Pharisee didn't and I'll tell you why. "... for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18: 14).

Our tendency when we hear this parable is to connect with the tax collector. But I think Jesus told the story because of followers, spiritual people like us, we're more like the Pharisee. He wants them and us to see ourselves in the Pharisee. Because we are a lot like the Pharisee, too spiritually wise to realize he was spiritually blind. Like the Pharisee, we can trust in our self and our goodness. Our spiritual practices are more often about feeling good

about ourselves than connecting with God. We can be so blinded by our virtues that we fail to see our vices. And like the Pharisee, we can be incredibly harsh on other people, writing them off as lost causes rather than seeing them as normal weak people just like you and me.

True spiritual insight belongs to the humble. It belongs to those who can recognize their limitations and see how messed up they are. And we are messed up. We aren't always very loving. We aren't always very kind. We can be thoughtless and arrogant, uncaring and cruel. If we were to count only on our righteousness to save us, we would be in serious trouble.

But as it is, God isn't grading us on our righteousness or how well we follow the rules. He's not grading us on how merciful we are either. It's not our obedience that makes us holy and it's not how loving and civil and kind we are that counts in God's eyes. It's not even whether or not we get the point. It's God's mercy and grace that counts. It's the only thing that counts. Prayer is confessing the need and asking for mercy. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18: 13b). It is petitioning, "create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit" (Psalm 51:1b). It's asking God to forgive us, to help us, to heal us, and to make us better.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus, of course, knew this. It was why he told this story on the way to the cross. Just a few days from telling this story about our need for forgiveness, he stretches out his arms on a cross. In his dying and in his rising from the dead, he makes forgiveness and grace happen.

So, on this day when we begin our journey, pray for mercy and beg that God will help you to become merciful. Pray for forgiveness and offer forgiveness. Pray for the strength to follow God's rules and ways, but more than that, to experience grace when you don't. It's why Jesus told this story and it is why he made his way to the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers (Kindle Locations 151-154). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Bythe, Scott. Begging and Bragging. Retrieved by subscription at sermon.com

<sup>3</sup> Toh, Justine. [https://www.commongrace.org.au/parables\\_pharisee\\_and\\_tax\\_collector](https://www.commongrace.org.au/parables_pharisee_and_tax_collector)

<sup>4</sup> Kalas, J. Ellsworth. Parables from the Back Side. Vol. 1. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Bythe, Scott.