

Luke 18:9-14

⁹Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple courts to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.’

¹³“However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

¹⁴“I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Hands of Repentance

I.

Do you know the story behind the iconic “Praying Hands” picture by Lutheran artist Albrecht Durer? Albrecht and his brother both wanted to be artists. Coming from a family with 18 children, there just wasn’t money for education. The two brothers drew straws to see which would go to study art, while the loser would work in the mines to pay for the other’s education. Once the first began to earn a living from his art, the deal was he would then pay for the other brother.

Albrecht won and attended school for art, eventually becoming an artist. However, by the time he had finished his schooling, his brother had developed arthritis working in the mines and could not hold a pen or brush to do any artwork. Albrecht used his brother’s hands as a model for his art.

Sometimes you can tell a lot from a person’s hands. Some hands are rough and chapped and calloused from physical labor. Some hands are silky-smooth, and have to be for the work that pair of hands performs.

Think of all the things you do with your hands. Brush your teeth. Check your e-mail. Eat your lunch. Open a door. Pick up a book. Turn a page. It would be very difficult for most of us to even imagine performing any of these daily tasks without our hands.

Hands are an indispensable part of people’s lives. It is no surprise that human hands also figure prominently in the events surrounding our Savior’s suffering and death. This year the theme for our midweek Lenten sermons is “The Hands of the Passion.” Today we look at the Ash Wednesday Gospel.

Consider the two men Jesus describes in his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It is a familiar story. Imagine this evening what these men looked like and what their prayers sounded like.

Perhaps you have never thought about their hands before. Picture their hands. Try to make a connection between the actions of their hands and the attitudes of their hearts. Apply what you observe to your own life.

II.

The setting for Jesus’ parable is the temple in Jerusalem. Two fictional—but very believable—people have come to this sacred place for the same purpose—to pray. Both begin their prayers with the same word: “God.” *That* is where the similarities end.

The first man is a Pharisee. Pharisees were the spiritual elite of Jewish society. Pharisees were always quick to seize the moral high ground. They were more reverent and more obedient than their fellow Jews, and this particular Pharisee wanted everyone else in the temple to know it.

He prayed: “God, I thank you...” (Luke 18:11, EHV). What a great beginning for a prayer! You or I might start a prayer that way. Christian parents teach their children to pray that way. If only the Pharisee would have stopped there. If only he would have said, “Dear God, I thank you. Amen.”

What did people do with their hands back then when they prayed? Paul once said to Timothy: “I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands” (1 Timothy 2:8, EHV). Perhaps it was common to pray with hands held up high to the heavens. Maybe some people prayed with fingers interlocked, or with one hand on top of the other, like some of us do.

Which ever way people held their hands, the content of the Pharisee’s prayer is what is troubling, not the position of his hands. Unfortunately, he continued. He said: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11, EHV). It wasn’t a prayer of thanksgiving at all. What he was really doing was giving himself a verbal pat on the back. He wasn’t a robber—he had kept the Seventh Commandment. He was no adulterer—he had kept the Sixth Commandment. The way the Pharisee saw it, he had kept all of the commandments.

Actually, that wasn’t entirely true. The Pharisee didn’t believe he had merely kept the law. He was convinced that his obedience went above and beyond the requirements of the law. Just in case God hadn’t noticed, he provided some specific examples at the end of his prayer: “I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income” (Luke 18:12, EHV). The Law of Moses required faithful Jews to fast one day out of the year—*he* fasted two days out of every *week*. On top of that, he gave God back ten percent of everything he received whether he had earned it or not.

On the surface, the Pharisee looked very good. Because of his morality, because of his generosity, other people probably looked up to him. But what about beneath the surface? What was going on inside his head? What was in his heart? Why did he feel compelled to pray that prayer?

Luke doesn’t provide any details about the Pharisee’s motivation, so anything we come up with will be speculation. It is possible that he was so impressed with himself, so full of himself, so blinded by sinful pride that he didn’t realize how arrogant he was. Or perhaps he knew himself better than he was letting on. Maybe he prayed that proud prayer to mask his insecurity. Maybe he drew attention to the good things he had done to deflect attention away from all the good things he hadn’t done. Maybe he wasn’t trying to convince the other worshipers in the temple of his special relationship with God as much as he was trying to convince himself.

Ash Wednesday is about acknowledging our sinfulness. Ash Wednesday is about asking God for forgiveness. On Ash Wednesday sinners look to Jesus as our only hope for salvation. But because the Pharisee was unwilling to admit that he needed to be saved, because he failed to acknowledge and repent of his sins, it didn’t matter how many prayers he prayed or how many good deeds he did. He went home empty-handed.

Most worshipers probably didn’t even take notice of the other man who was praying in the temple. Look at his hands. Look at his entire posture. He stood at a distance. His chin was buried in his chest. He was so ashamed that he clenched his hands into fists and beat his breast. He knew what he had done. He knew what he deserved. But instead of giving up hope, he offered up a simple prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13, EHV).

The tax collector didn’t try to compare himself to the really bad people to make himself look good. He didn’t put together a resume of all the good things he had done to make himself look and feel better. Instead he stared at himself in the mirror of God’s law. He saw

himself for the helpless sinner that he was, and he recognized that his only hope was to plead for mercy.

It wasn't a long prayer—only seven words in English—but it was powerful because it was genuine, because it was heartfelt, because it came from a heart of humble faith. The faith of the tax collector was rewarded when Jesus declared: “I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14, EHV).

III.

Jesus didn't share this story with a specific person or class of people. The parable wasn't addressed exclusively to Pharisees or tax collectors or his disciples. Luke tells us: “Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others” (Luke 18:9, EHV).

Look into the crowd. Who might fit that description? Maybe the classmate in school who is always talking about how great she is. Maybe the coworker who is constantly trying to tell you how to do your job. Maybe the friend whose annual Christmas letter feels like an excuse to brag about his family. Or when you examine the faces in the crowd more closely, do you see someone who looks a lot like you?

When we complain about people who think they are better than us, aren't we making ourselves out to be better than them? When we criticize the people who look down on the rest of us, aren't we looking down our noses at them? We would never stand up in the front of church and call out another worshiper like the Pharisee did, but would God have the right to judge us for the way we pass judgment on each other in our hearts?

It is easy to think and act like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. Instead, imitate the example of the tax collector. Fold your hands and lay open your heart. Not just on Ash Wednesday, but every day, confess: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13, EHV).

IV.

Take one more look at this story. Remember that there is actually a third person in this parable—the person who told it. If anyone had a legitimate reason to boast about himself, it was Jesus. He honored his parents. He obeyed the laws of the land. He kept every commandment of God perfectly. Not for his own benefit. Not so that he would have something to boast about. Everything he did, he did for you.

If anyone had a legitimate reason to *not* be humble, it was Jesus. As true God, he knows all and sees all and rules all, and yet the Creator of all things made himself nothing. He took on human flesh. He took on the role of a servant. He allowed himself to be humiliated and ultimately executed, not to pay for his own sins, because he had no sin. Everything he did, he did for you.

Because of his mercy Jesus took your place. He lived a sinless life in your place and died on the cross in your place, to make sure that you will have a place at his side in heaven.

Because of his mercy, Jesus gives you the gift of prayer. You can talk to him anywhere, anytime, about anything. And you have his promise that when you pray he will hear you and answer you and always, always do what is best for you.

Because of his mercy, Jesus gives you his true body and blood in Holy Communion, and when you receive the sacrament, you receive the personal assurance of free and full forgiveness.

Because of God's great mercy, you don't have to be weighed down by guilt. Because of his mercy, you have absolutely nothing to fear. Your Savior will be with you as long as you live. You know where you are going when you die. You can leave this house of worship with humble confidence because you are in good hands. You are in God's hands. Amen.