

Let me ask you a tough question this morning— how many of you have been accused of being a *poor listener*? We hear what we want to hear. Most of us have been guilty of this at one time or another. Maybe we have trouble listening to others because we're tired or stressed out. And maybe we just don't care enough about others to pay close attention to them. We've all been guilty of being a bad listener at one time or another. This may have been why Jesus spoke in parables so often. He knew that we are easily distracted. He knew that we have our own agendas. And he knew that sometimes our ego gets in the way of hearing God's voice.

We all like to think we're a big man or a big woman in some arena, don't we? It's no fun when our ego-trip gets derailed. Imagine how Jesus' listeners in our Gospel Reading for today felt. Let's hope their big egos didn't get in the way of their hearing and understanding it. And let's hope that our big egos don't prevent us from hearing it and understanding it today.

This Bible passage starts with the words, "*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable...*" Every parable Jesus told is an opportunity—an opportunity to understand God better; an opportunity to conform our lives to the image of God; an opportunity to turn away from wrongdoing and get a fresh start. What did Jesus want to teach his hearers with this story?

First of all, Jesus wanted them to know that, when we compare ourselves to others, we turn certainty into a competition. Jesus wanted his hearers to understand that they were wasting their time looking down on others: God is not about standing, but about relationships. And it's a blunder to define ourselves by *what we are not*, as opposed to by *who God is*.

We were made in the image of God. If we accept Jesus Christ as our Role-model and Guide, we are adopted into God's family and are children of God. So, our identity is not based on how we *compare* to others. Our identity is not even based on our right actions. Our identity is based on who God is. And the Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy—different...totally, remarkably different!

Self-righteousness is not the same thing as holiness. The Pharisee made the mistake of comparing himself to other people—"God, I thank you that I am not like other people...." We can all do that, too. And in comparison, we may not look too bad.

The Pharisee *did* look good when compared to the tax collector. Pharisees were members of a demanding sect. They devoted their lives to observing the regulations and rulings of Jewish law. They were the *gold standard* for religious righteousness in their community. The tax collector, on the other hand, was considered a traitor to his own people because he worked for an outside government in a capacity that allowed him to cheat his fellow Jews by eking out extra fees, here and there, to line his own pockets. His profession encouraged corruption. As one commentator puts it:

“Tax collectors were considered traitors and extorters. They were not allowed to be witnesses or judges in court because they were considered untrustworthy. They were excommunicated from the synagogue.”

The Pharisee may have thought he was *all right* in comparison to the tax collector. But the tax collector wasn't who he was in competition with. His *competition* was the person he himself was created to be.

The Pharisee's prayer showed there was a gaping hole in his life—he didn't really know God. That's a sad, scary truth. We can do everything right in life, keep all the rules of our religion, and still not know God.

The second thing Jesus is trying to teach his hearers is—when we compare ourselves to God rather than with others, we realize we don't have anything to add. What does the tax collector in this parable do? He doesn't even look up to heaven when he prays. Instead, he looks down at the ground, beats his breast in sorrow, and simply prays, *“God, have mercy on me...a sinner.”*

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This tax collector compared himself to a holy, holy, holy God, and he knew he had nothing to recommend him. I think the tax collector categorized himself with David who wrote in Psalm 51, *“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”* (Ps. 51:17)

A few years back, a famous physicist was giving a lecture at Princeton Seminary. There were a number of preachers in the audience; and during the question-and-answer session, one of them asked, “What is it that ministers could learn from scientists?” Without hesitation, the physicist said, “Humility.” “Oh, that's a surprising answer,” the questioner said, “I thought all scientists were rather arrogant in *all* that they know.”

The physicist said, “No, oh no! You may have met one here and there, but the great scientists are all very humble because they stand every morning before the mystery of *all they do not know*. And if anyone should be humble, it would be a minister who stands every morning before the mystery of the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the world.”

You cannot know who God is and still hold on to your pride and self-righteousness. Jesus finishes his parable with the words—*“I tell you that this person, rather than the other, went home justified before God; for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

What does he mean, *“...he went home justified”*? It means his wrongs were pardoned; he now stood acquitted. He got exactly what he asked for—mercy from a holy, holy, holy God who knows that we can never be righteous enough to deserve his mercy. So God sent a perfect, faultless Jesus, to take away the penalty of our sins and render us holy in God's eyes.

If you don't know grace, you don't know God—because grace, the unearned gift of God's love and salvation was God's plan from the very beginning. In his book *Proof*, Timothy Paul Jones writes about his one daughter who was adopted. She had been adopted before, but her adoptive family gave her up and put her back in the foster system.

For some reason, her previous family didn't treat the little girl like she truly was *their child*. When they went to Disney World, they took their biological children with them but left their adopted daughter behind. She got the message that she wasn't wanted, wasn't good enough to deserve a gift like Disney World—she wasn't a full member of the family.

So, when Timothy Jones and his family adopted this little girl, she was wont to exhibit un-wanted behavioral outbursts. The Jones family decided that the best way to welcome this little girl to their family was to plan a trip with her to Disney World. But when they told their new daughter, her behavior problems multiplied. She lied, she stole food, she treated her new siblings horribly. No matter what system of punishment or reward the Jones' used, their adopted daughter's behavior was out of control. This little girl was so afraid of not getting to go to Disney World that she was trying to guarantee her new parents would have every good reason to leave her behind.

The day finally came for their trip, and the family went all out—rides, refreshments, and long lines and exhaustion. As they collapsed in their room that night, Jones asked his new daughter what she thought of her experience. She smiled and said, "Daddy, I finally got to go to Disney World; but it wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours." And then Jones writes—

"That's the message of outrageous grace. Outrageous grace isn't a favor you achieve by being good; it's the gift you receive by being God's [child]." Tim Smith, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/in-the-beginning-tim-smith-sermon-on-sin-210924?ref=SermonSerps>.

The Pharisee missed out on the gift of God's outrageous grace because he thought he could do something to earn it. He didn't want any charity. He wanted to be good enough. He was comparing himself to those around him. But the tax collector compared himself to God and cried out for mercy.

If you don't know the gift of outrageous grace, then you don't know God. Our salvation is not about *our* goodness, but about God's doing us one big, unearned favor.