

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“A Realistic Self-Assessment”**

**Psalm 32
Luke 18:9 – 14**

September 27, 2015

I want to start out this morning by making a confession to you. I have to admit that, when it comes to discussing summer driving in the Hamptons... I tend to sound an awful lot like the Pharisee in our gospel lesson from Luke. You know, self-righteous... sanctimonious... smug.

*“I’m so glad that I’m not like all the other drivers in the village during the summer! Maniacs... idiots... and jerks! I always signal when I make a turn; I never run red lights; I keep my speed within ten miles an hour of the posted limit! I know what I’m doing! If only **everyone else** would just drive like me... all would be well on our streets and highways.”*

That’s how I usually sound, when I’m trading summer driving war stories with various friends and neighbors. Driving is heck from Memorial Day to Labor Day... but it ain’t my fault, baby, no sirree! I’m not out there making things worse! I’m one of the good guys! I’m one of the safe guys! I’m just a law-abiding citizen, trying to make it home from Waldbaum’s without winding up as a hood ornament on some Floridian’s Ferrari!

That’s the nice, self-righteous fiction that I’ve created for myself, about myself, in order to justify myself. But if you drove around with me all summer, and saw the way that I **really** drive sometimes... you’d know that I ought to be sounding a whole lot more like the tax-collector from our parable. Because sometimes I’m impatient; sometimes I drive too fast; sometimes I fail to signal; and sometimes, I’m just as big a jerk as anybody else that’s driving around out there. All of which means that, instead of crowing about how great I drive compared to all the lunatics; I should say, “*God, have mercy on me, a lousy New York driver.*” That, I’m afraid, would be a much more realistic self-assessment, for me!

Now, looking specifically at our text, Luke prefaces the telling of this parable, by informing us that Jesus was speaking “*to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.*” Luke doesn’t specify Jesus’ audience beyond this very general description. But, given the two characters mentioned in the parable, it’s likely that the people to whom Jesus was directing the story were, themselves, Pharisees... who were well known for aspiring to spiritual righteousness through their meticulous keeping of the Jewish Law; and who were also known for ostracizing and minimizing those whose Law-keeping was not so meticulous as their own.

Like, for example, tax-collectors... maybe the most thoroughly disliked and disrespected class of people in the entire Holy Land. Even in our own day, the taxman isn’t exactly a popular figure. But in the time of Jesus, it was much, much worse. Tax-collectors worked for the Romans, who were the conquerors, the oppressors, the occupying force which brought daily shame and anguish to all the people of Palestine. Tax-collectors were considered to be traitors, collaborators, and helpers of the enemy, in the eyes of their fellow Jews. And for this they were hated and

resented. On top of all this, tax-collectors regularly extorted money from their countrymen... using threats and coercion to collect the tax, and then some, from their helpless victims.

Finally, tax-collectors were ritually “unclean” according to Jewish law, due to their daily contact with gentile Romans. Jews were forbidden to have any kind of dealings with gentiles, or non-Jews; but tax-collectors had to interact with gentiles as part of their job. This resulted in their being officially cut off from the religious life of their community.

So, in the eyes of John Q. Jewish-person, tax-collectors were traitorous, dishonest, and apostate... all at the same time. They were outcasts of the first order. Small wonder, then, that tax-collectors were pretty much the most looked-down upon people of all. Even more so than adulterers, prostitutes, and lepers.

So, when Jesus makes a Pharisee and a tax-collector the stars of a parable told specifically to a bunch of people who were pretty sure that they were A-OK, while everybody else was a loser... everyone in the room must have assumed that the Pharisee was going to be the good guy in the story. The hero, the shining example, the one to really shame the miserable tax-collector. And, sure enough, as Jesus begins the parable, He certainly makes it seem that way. According to the story, these two men, the Pharisee and the tax-collector, go into the temple to pray. And, right off the bat, Jesus tells us that the Pharisee stands up and begins a sanctimonious recitation of all his religious accomplishments.

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

Now, that’s a pretty darn good religious resume, for a first century Jew. I mean, this Pharisee really was following the rules, obeying the laws, and going the extra mile in the quest for spiritual superiority. He didn’t steal; that’s keeping the Eighth Commandment. He didn’t cheat on his wife; check off Commandment number Seven. He wasn’t an “evildoer,” which pretty much covers all the rest of the Commandments. And he certainly wasn’t a low-down, no-good, sell-out traitor like the miserable tax-collector who was praying there next to him.

And beyond avoiding sinfulness and evil, this Pharisee was also positively *doing* good things. He fasted twice a week, which was far more than what was obligatory for a faithful Jew. The only mandatory fast was on the annual Day of Atonement; but especially devout Jews also fasted every Monday and Thursday... which is apparently what this guy was doing. He also pays a ten percent tithe on everything that he brings in, even the income which, according to Jewish law, was not subject to the tithe. So, he gave more than he needed to... again proving that he was one seriously pious dude.

And, at this point in the parable, everyone in Jesus’ audience would have been nodding in approval of the conduct of the Pharisee. Here was an upstanding example of a really religious person, taking his richly deserved bows, in the light of his spiritual accomplishments. They would have been, like, *“Way to go, Jesus! Amen! That’s one great Pharisee you’ve got there!”*

And then Jesus turns His attention to the lowly tax-collector... a guy who, by all rights, shouldn’t have been in the temple in the first place; being, as I mentioned before, ritually unclean because of his daily contact with gentile Romans. Normally, he would have been shouted out of the temple by the priests and Levites and other sanctuary gatekeepers; but for the sake of the story, Jesus places him in the temple, in the same sacred space as the Pharisee.

And what does the tax-collector say? Well, he doesn't give us a rundown of his wonderful religious accomplishments, that's for darn sure. There's no grandstanding about tithing and fasting, or helping little old ladies across the street. In fact, the tax-collector says absolutely nothing about any good works that he might have been doing. And neither does he try to favorably compare himself to any of the other sinners of the community. There's no, "*Gee, at least I'm no adulterer, know what I mean, Lord? I've never made any graven images, right? I've obeyed five or six of the Ten Commandments, and that ain't bad!*"

No, according to Jesus, all this tax-collector does is stand apart, cast down his eyes, beat his breast, and say: "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" And, again, the people in Jesus' audience would have no doubt been nodding enthusiastically, and saying something like, "*Right you are, rabbi! A good for nothing sinner is that tax-collector! He has spoken truly about himself!*" To which Jesus then said:

"Right you are, my friends. And I tell you that this man, this sinful tax-collector; rather than the self-righteous Pharisee... went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The tax-collector, you see, had got it right: his self-assessment was realistic, true, spot-on. He knew *who* he was, he knew *what* he was, and he knew how *lost* he was... without the grace and mercy of God. So he threw himself *on* that divine mercy; and in honesty and humility, sought out the forgiveness of God. And, as Jesus tells us, that forgiveness was given.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, did *not* have an honest or realistic self-assessment. Oh, it was honest as far as it went; he was on the mark when he ticked off the list of his religious accomplishments. But his problem was that he didn't go far enough; his prayer was all about how good *he* was, how religious *he* was, how spiritually self-sufficient *he* was. In his self-assessment there was nothing for Almighty God to do except to pat him on the head, and tell him what a good little Pharisee he'd been. The Pharisee didn't realize that, in spite of his good works, he was still a sinner, and every bit as much in need of God's mercy as the hated tax-collector. His heart was closed to the life-giving presence of God; and filled with the self-satisfied belief that he really had no *need* of God!

And, so, Jesus said that this Pharisee returned to his home *un*-justified... and still in need of the grace, and the love, and humility which are the hallmarks of the gospel message. The Pharisee thought he was better than the tax-collector; and in some ways he was. But not in his heart; not in his soul; not in his ability to understand his true condition. And that made all the difference.

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own quest for an honest and realistic self-assessment of who we actually are as Christian disciples. I know for sure that many of us, like the Pharisee in the parable, have done a lot of really wonderful things. I mean, I could make like a 17th century preacher and spend the next three hours going down the list of all the ways that you've followed Jesus' teaching and fulfilled the Lord's commandments. (I *won't* do that... but I could, if I wanted to!) And that's great! That's fantastic! To be generous; to care about the hungry and the homeless; to teach the lessons of the Bible; to proclaim the message of the gospel; to bow our heads before the Lord in prayer; this is what being a disciple is all about! And we *do* that, and much more, every single day!

And it's okay to feel good about it all! Just as long as we don't forget that, in one way or another, each of us is also like the tax-collector, too. Not that we're traitors, and thieves, and religious apostates! I don't mean that! I just mean that, we sometimes *fail* to keep God's commandments; sometimes we *don't* love our neighbor as ourselves; sometimes we're greedy, grasping, worldly; sometimes we hold grudges, and withhold mercy; sometimes we live as if God weren't a part of our lives at all.

Like the tax-collector, we need to remember that that's *also* a part of who we are. Because it's in so remembering, that we are driven, like him, to bow before the Lord and seek His mercy, His grace, and His love. It's in so realizing, that we allow ourselves to be brought to our knees by *our* weakness... that we might be lifted to our feet by *His* strength. And that, you see, is the definition of spiritual growth, and a strengthening faith, and a life with Jesus Christ that's really going somewhere... and making a real difference: to ourselves, and to our world.

The tax-collector had a realistic self-assessment of who he was as a child of God. The Pharisee did not. In this one all-important way, may we follow the example of that tax-collector, and give the Lord real and unlimited access to our hearts.

And our life with Christ will be better than it's ever been! That's His promise; in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!