

**"A Lesson in Humility?" – Luke 18:9-14 – October 22, 2016**  
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At the beginning of every new school year it seems like one of the topics in the news centers around the issue of bullying. And tragically we sometimes hear about young people who, having found themselves the victims of bullying from their peers and unable to handle the misery any longer, could see no other alternative but to take their own lives. These teen suicides jar us awake to take notice of a very real problem.

Bullying certainly is nothing new. It has been around a very long time. In fact, in the Genesis story of Cain and Able we see the act of bullying taken to the extreme. Additionally, we discover later on in the book of Genesis, that the sons of Jacob are so jealous of their brother Joseph and his coat of many colors, they decide to toss him into a pit and then sell him to slave traders.

Some of us here today were perhaps the victims of bullying in our own schools and homes when we were growing up. But in our current media-dominated world of texting, social networking, and the internet, today's bullies are inflicting their hatred in a variety of destructive and very public ways, causing significant pain and torment to their targets. Surprisingly it has even been an issue in this election season.

At the core of bullying are a couple of things. One is the need to feel good about oneself by putting down someone else. And another is to target those individuals who are somehow different in appearance or lifestyle and to denigrate that difference.

Some might believe that bullying is just a part of childhood and adolescence, a vicious rite of passage that goes away, or at least tones down, once we're all grown up. But unfortunately that is not the case. Part of our nature as sinful human beings is to be cognizant of the differences between ourselves and others. The differences bother us. We find them distasteful. We believe that our ways of doing things or how we see the world is the normative way, and those who follow a different path are somehow inferior to us or just flat out wrong. It's at the core of many of our "-isms" – racism, sexism, classism.

I always am fascinated by those television shows or internet videos that demonstrate these human tendencies. With some hidden cameras and a few actors, the producers create a scenario to see how average people might react and respond. I remember seeing one scenario that was a staged confrontation between a small food shop employee and a woman dressed in Moslem clothing including the head scarf. The shop employee refused to serve her, calling her a terrorist and making other derogatory remarks. She fought back, saying she was an American, born and raised, and just wanted to buy an apple turnover. The purpose of the skit was to see how other customers would react to this blatant discrimination. Sadly, there were some who chose not to get involved and others who actually agreed with the racist comments.

In another skit, the setting was a busy city sidewalk during the morning rush hour. An actor, who was physically attractive and professionally dressed, collapsed on the sidewalk. The goal was to

see who would stop to help. Each time this occurred, passersby stopped quickly to help the woman. Bonus points to the good Samaritans.

Lest we get too excited about the goodness of human nature, the producers then altered the scenario by substituting a male actor who was scruffy and dressed in ragged clothes. When he collapsed on that very same sidewalk, very few people stopped to help. And then when the producers added a beer can to the scene, no one stopped to help the man except an actual homeless woman. Having no cell phone, she called out to other people walking by, trying to get someone to call 911, but everyone ignored her.

We humans judge others. We make assumptions about other people, and we classify them as either worthy or unworthy based upon those assumptions. Simply put, it is an "us versus them" type of attitude, and those people who don't belong to the "us" side, are kept on the outside.

Now with all this in mind, let us take a look at the parable from Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that Jesus is speaking to an audience of people who regarded themselves as righteous and looked with contempt upon those who were not. Basically they were people puffed up about their own goodness and quick to condemn those who didn't measure up.

The parable that Jesus tells appears to be straightforward, yet it closes with a surprising twist. Two men come to the Temple to pray – one is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Now, to understand how Jesus' audience heard this parable, we have to dismiss what we think we know about these two types of people. We have been trained to think of the Pharisees as the bad guys because they are often presented as opponents to Jesus. Yet actually the Pharisees were what we would think of as moral and upstanding citizens. They would be characterized as dependable, law-abiding, and honest. We would enjoy having them as good neighbors and decent members of society. Worship and prayer and education were important to them. We would welcome them into our community with open arms.

This particular Pharisee in the parable is described as being a solid individual, coming to the Temple to pray. He contributes more than is required of him, and because of this, was probably known to be very generous to those around him. As he is praying in the Temple, he adopts the correct posture, arms and head raised. Everything about him seems right, and he begins to pray. He doesn't ask God for anything but instead offers what sounds like a check list of his good deeds. Now this guy has his life under control and he is pretty content with that. He says, "God I thank you that I am not like the other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

Next is the tax collector. He is described in the parable as standing far off, perhaps even out in the court of the Temple reserved for the Gentiles, even though he is a Jew. He knows he has done wrong. His very profession is wrong. As a tax collector, he earns his living working for the controlling government – that of the Roman Empire. His job required him to pay a set amount to the Romans, and he could collect that money however he wanted. Anything he collected over and above what was due to the Romans was his to keep. To his fellows Jews he was a crook and a traitor.

The tax collector recognizes his guilt and he has come to the Temple with his head bowed down. He is remorseful and weighed down by his sin. In his prayer he doesn't make a promise to change his ways. He simply acknowledges his sinfulness and cries out for God's mercy.

Now remember, to Jesus' audience, the Pharisee is still seen as the upstanding citizen here. He is a good, moral person, gives generously, and isn't anything like that lowlife tax collector, who basically steals money from his own people for a living. Yet Jesus surprises the audience by saying it is the tax collector who goes home justified - that is, right with God - he is justified rather than the Pharisee. And then it seems that this parable is some sort of lesson in humility. Jesus states, those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

If that's the case, then all we need to do to be right with God is to be full of humility. Okay. That may not be overly easy, but with practice we can learn how to suppress our pride and not be so boastful about our good deeds. We can humble ourselves before God. We can go about our business, living our moral lives, obeying the law, and doing our good works. Paying our bills on time and donating to charity and whatnot. All we have to do is not be so puffed up about it, right?

And then we can say, thank goodness I'm not anything like that self-righteous, holier than thou Pharisee.

Now, did you see what just happened? That's the trap of this parable. When we are focused so much on what we do, on our actions, on who we are, whether we're doing good works or trying to be humble, we totally miss the point that Jesus was trying to make. We categorize and assign value to people all the time, without even realizing it. We judge people, assess their worth, on what they do or how they look.

If you want to try an experiment, take an hour or so to intentionally people watch. Go somewhere and take the time to watch the people that come and go. You could spend some time wandering around the Walmart in Rib Mountain, hang out at the Farmer's Market, sit on a bench on the 400 Block, or visit a hospital waiting room. Maybe go to ball game, not to watch the game, but to observe the fans. Or sit in on a meal at Primrose or visit an elementary school art class. Just watch people for a while, and intentionally be aware of what your brain does.

Now stop a minute and think back. Even as I was reciting that list of places, your brain was already imagining the type of people you might see. Right? Or maybe it's just my brain.

Thank God, I am not like the morally reprehensible tax collector. Or thank God, I am not like the prideful Pharisee. One or the other? We say them both, because at times we are both.

So if the message of this parable isn't really about humility, what is it? The Pharisee did all the right things; he was righteous according to the law. The tax collector did all the wrong things, yet he was the one who went home justified. And why is that?

Because even though the Pharisee lived a good life, he was focused on his deeds. Look what I've done, God. See how good I am? Life was good for the Pharisee. He was content. He didn't need God for anything, he didn't rely on God. He believed he was okay, because he lived an okay life. He was blind to his own shortcomings, especially that of judging and devaluing others.

The tax collector was overwhelmed by his sinfulness, and he came to God in confession. He didn't bargain, he didn't say, I'll do this and this and this. I'll change all my bad ways and then I'll be good enough to earn your favor. He came to God vulnerable and repentant and ashamed. He recognized his deep need for God.

The lesson of this parable is there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's love. The tax collector cried out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He didn't try to earn his way into God's favor, because he knew he couldn't. Instead, he simply asked for it. He recognized not only his need for a right relationship with God, but also that there was nothing he could do to get it. The relationship only comes through acceptance of God's gift of grace.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, was deluded into thinking that he was already in a right relationship with God because he did all the right things. His delusion led him to feelings of superiority and self-assuredness. Yet because of this self-righteousness, he was caught in the trap of disparaging others to make himself look better. Taken to extremes, this can lead to stigmatizing and bullying those who act and think differently. We don't have to look very far to see how religious pride can lead to incidents of hurting those who have differing beliefs. When we start to define ourselves by who we are against, we tend to overlook our own shortcomings.

When we focus on the faults of others, we fail to see the fault in ourselves. Certainly, the tax collector made his share of mistakes. We don't have to pretend he didn't. But instead of condemning those faults, we can accept our common humanity. Our value comes not in what we do, but in loving and accepting ourselves as God loves us. That is our true worth, not in how we compare with others. We don't increase in value by putting ourselves ahead of someone else.

Our brains will naturally categorize people – the brain is only trying to discover patterns so it can make sense of the world. That's what it's supposed to do. And part of that process is assigning value. The more similar to us, the more value we assign.

But that's not the way God values us. When we can truly begin to wrap our minds around that, then those scales of relative worth that we try to ascribe to ourselves and to others become absolutely meaningless. The less time and energy we spend on trying to judge another's standing, the more we have for truly embracing one another and their differences. When we focus less on where we stand in the grand scheme of things, the more we can focus on compassion – both giving it and receiving it.