
Humility before God

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 26 October 2025

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18 • Luke 18:9-14



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

I was baptised in a church in Menlo Park, California, which is about 80 km south of San Francisco. Melissa and I were living in a nearby town, Redwood City, at the time — this was almost 20 years ago. The church was named after St Bede, and it was the first church I belonged to in the US. I was in the choir there, and we had a great choir director, who was also the assistant priest, a woman named Jane. Jane liked to do interesting music with the choir, besides the traditional worship hymns. One night she passed out to us at rehearsal a piece based on today's Gospel, about the Pharisee and the tax-collector. It was a good piece, with solo parts for each of the two main characters, and full choir support. I was pleased to be chosen to sing the part of the tax-collector, and Jane decided that we would do a little acting along with it just for fun.

So, during the hymn, the woman (I think it was a woman — we had a woman in the tenor section, as she had a fairly low, and quite good voice) — the woman who played the Pharisee stood out in front of the choir, raising her hands to heaven, and proclaiming all the virtues of the Pharisee: he tithed regularly (which means he gave 10% of his earnings) and he fasted twice a week. And he gave thanks to God that he was not like that terrible tax-collector over there.

And over there, was I — hanging my head and beating my chest. Well, I didn't actually beat my chest, but I tried to look as humble as I could. And looking back on it now, I realise that I was only thinking about humility before God. That is important, for God is so far above us, and is our Creator, and the Creator of absolutely everything else, so that humility is realistically the only attitude we can adopt. Spreading out your palms in supplication is an appropriate gesture, and it contrasted strongly with the Pharisee's upraised arms and face.

It must be noted that the Pharisee's physical posture was a common one for prayer for the Jews, and in fairness it does demonstrate an awareness of the greatness of God — the outstretched arms showing the vastness of God's existence, although they do also seem to say, "Look at me!" And it is interesting to note also that the typical Christian attitude of prayer is a small gesture: hands held together and head bowed. That difference illustrates a large part of the meaning of this Gospel passage.

But there is something else, equally important to note here. The Pharisee not only exalted himself, he also put down the tax-collector. Part of the Pharisees prayer was "Thank God I'm not like this tax-collector." He judged the other man, and put himself above him; and did it in a way that seemed almost like a wink of conspiracy with God — "Look at this other guy! I tell you. He's pretty bad, isn't he?" The Pharisee was absolutely secure in his belief that God would find him to be the better of the two and would reward him accordingly.

Needless to say, boasting before God of one's own greatness and putting others down is not the way to please God. God asks for humility. But what about confidence? The passage from Paul is interesting in this regard. Paul writes:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

Is this not boasting, similar to the Pharisee's? The difference is that Paul knows and often proclaims the majesty of God, and always gives God the glory for any successes he may have in his ministry. It is OK to have confidence in God's goodness, for we know that God is good and true and loves us. God has promised to us that if we have faith, we will be rewarded. If we make faith and humility the centre of our relationship with God, then we can have confidence, for God does not make empty promises.

So the faithful Christian may boast, as Paul puts it, as long as he boasts of God's glory, and not of himself. Boasting of your own worth as a Christian naturally leads to judging others, as the Pharisee judged the tax-collector. And it is something we need to beware of also. Today we often hear about other churches, like some of the so-called megachurches, which worship God in

different ways perhaps from how we worship God. It is easy to be critical, and to think that such other Christians are not as faithful as we are, that they somehow aren't "true" Christians. I hear this attitude expressed sometimes towards "Bible-belt Christians" in the United States, particularly if they have conservative political views. It happens here, too, between the two parts of our sadly-split Anglican Communion. Other Christians may have somewhat different beliefs, but it is not our place to judge — God is the judge. We may certainly disagree about how to worship, but we must not let it slip into an "I'm-a-better-Christian-than-you" mentality. If we do, then we are no better than the Pharisee in the parable.

Let us learn from the example of the tax-collector. He is a person who knows he is a sinner, who knows he is not perfect, but he still comes before God and asks for mercy. He does not judge the Pharisee, but stands humbly before his Creator. Such a person, as the parable says, is justified — literally, made right — before God. Once again, Jesus has taught us an important lesson about how to live in God's world, and we give thanks. Amen.