

As we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we hear what Jesus said, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." The unexpected is what we ought to expect from Jesus. The one we expect to be judged faithful is not. The one we thought to be condemned is redeemed. Jesus once again opens the rational systems of our humanity and shows us that **God's way is far beyond human understanding and prediction.**

There was a very lost, wicked, rebellious man who decided it would be good for business if he went down to the church and joined it. He was an adulterer, an alcoholic, and had never been a member of a church in his life. But when he went down to the altar to join the church, he gave public testimony to the church that there was no sin in his life, and that he had grown up in the church, and they readily accepted him as a member. When he went home, he told his wife what he had done, and his wife, a very godly lady, exploded. She rebuked him for being such a hypocrite and demanded that he go back to the church the next week and confess what he really was. Well, God used his wife to really break him, and he took it to heart.

The next Sunday he went back to the church, walked down to the front again, and this time confessed to the church all his sins. He told them he was dishonest, an alcoholic, an adulterer, and he was sorry. They revoked his membership on the spot. He walked out of the church that day scratching his head and muttered to himself: "These church folks are really strange. I told a lie, and they took me in; and when I told the truth they kicked me out!" God kicks us out when we lie and welcome us when we are truthful.

**T**he parable of the Pharisee and the Publican is one of the great parables of Jesus, one that has affected the consciousness of people in every age. It is also one of the best known of the parables, it is a parable of mercy and grace.

**U**nlike last week's parable which focused on the widow alone, this week's presents us with two characters, the Pharisee (*story of sin*) and the publican (*story of grace*) and they are of equal importance. We (*or others we have known*) have lived both stories as individuals, but we have also lived them as communities, Church, ethnic groups, nations, and cultures.

Two men went to worship before the altar. One was a good, believing, faith practicing, contributing Pharisee. The other was a money-grabbing, immoral, corrupt tax collector. The two men went back home after worship. One, the tax collector, went home forgiven, justified, blessed. The Pharisee was not. The Pharisee used prayer as a means of getting public recognition, not to seek fellowship with God. He sets himself apart, not just from the tax collector, but from all other men!

A fifth grader that came home from school so excited. She had been voted "prettiest girl in the class." The next day she was even more excited when she came home, for the

class had voted her "the most likely to succeed." The next day she came home and told her mother she had won a third contest, being voted "the most popular."

But the next day she came home extremely upset. The mother said, "What happened, did you lose this time?" She said, "Oh no, I won the vote again." The mother said, "What were you voted for this time?" She said, "most arrogant."

Now understand that the tax collector is **NOT** a good person. Jesus does not say that. The tax collector is a sinner, a man who has been dishonest and sometimes cruel. His humility is not a virtue we ought to copy. But his realistic assessment of his own wretchedness, his acknowledgment of his shortcomings and his need for forgiveness is. Neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector is the hero of this parable. Jesus does not end this parable with "**Go and do likewise**." Both characters in the story are sinners. One sins knowingly and the other unknowingly, but both come to the altar of prayer as sinners, just like us. What is going on in this parable is that God is loving and embracing everyone who falls short, everyone who stumbles, everyone who knows the frustrations of life.

All of us are partly Pharisees and partly tax collectors. Very few of us are one or the other all the time, but most of us are like one or the other some of the time. There are times when we come to worship as good, believing, righteous Pharisees who ask for nothing and get exactly that. But there are other times, when we come to church as tax collectors, needing everything, empty, lost, painfully aware of our sinfulness and our need of God's mercy. And we go home with even more than we dared to ask for. In other words, sometimes we fail at prayer and sometimes we succeed. Sometimes what happens here on Sunday Mass works for us and sometimes it just does not. Grace is a gift. Grace is not grace if it is expected. Sometimes it is there, and sometimes it is just not there.

God accepts us as we are. There is not a sin too black, not a deed too awful, not a thought too horrible for him to forgive. What cuts us off from his forgiveness and the freedom such forgiveness brings is our thinking that we must justify ourselves. Trusting in our own righteousness does not bring God's verdict of not guilty. Trusting in God's righteousness does.

In these tough times we are in, there will be a great need for acts of mercy and kindness. We can rise to this because Christ has given us mercy. He has poured out His life in giving us life. So, we can pour out our lives to the end because we have received a life that no one and nothing can take away from us.

God Bless You.