

“True Humility”
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[Luke 18:9-14](#)

I grew up with a love for Dr. Seuss. My mother, who has taught English literature, art, and drama over the years, is a great fan of Dr. Seuss and she instilled that love in me, as well. I'm now passing along that tradition, reading Dr. Seuss books to my kids. One of my favorite Dr. Seuss stories is "Yertle the Turtle," in which the title character has somehow decided that he is king of a pond. The story tells us that the pond was a nice little pond, clean and neat, with warm water and plenty to eat. Everyone was happy there, until Yertle decided that his kingdom was too small. He decided that he was ruler of all that he could see, but he really couldn't see very much because the stone that was his throne was just too low to the ground. So, Yertle ordered that nine turtles come to his stone and then he made them stack up, one on top of the other, until his throne was much taller and he could now see "almost a mile." He was quite happy with his new view and all that he now ruled over, for a little while, anyway. Yertle soon decided that his throne was still not high enough and so he ordered about two hundred turtles to stack up, one on top of the other, and then he was able to see much further and he was higher than the trees and all the land and the sea. Yertle was higher than everything and was quite happy with his new perch. He now ruled over everything. "There's nothing, no, NOTHING, that's higher than me," he exclaimed. He was surprised, then, when he saw the moon starting to rise above his throne. This made Yertle even more upset and decided he needed more turtles to stack up, so that he would be higher than the moon. Throughout all of this, however, the turtle at the bottom of the stack had become quite tired and was in great pain. He became rather angry with Yertle and with a small burp, he shook the whole stack of turtles and Yertle fell right off his high throne and into the pond. Dr. Seuss

sums it up with this line: “And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he, Is King of the Mud. That is all he can see.”

Dr. Seuss was quite a theologian. At my ordination, I was given a great book called *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. It was written by a retired pastor, James Kemp. In the Introduction, Kemp says that while in seminary he was asked in a survey to name his favorite theologian. He says most of his classmates answered Karl Barth or Soren Kierkegaard or John Wesley, but he answered that his favorite theologian is Theodor Seuss Geisel, AKA Dr. Seuss. He writes in his book about many of the great Seuss stories. About Yertle, Rev. Kemp says, “He wanted to get higher and higher so that he could have more and more power and control. And despite a few passing moments of exaltation, he ultimately—and in fairly short order—came down with a crash.” What happened to Yertle was just what Jesus said: “all who exalt themselves will be humbled.” Yertle was certainly exalting himself. He attempted to place himself above everything else in all creation, and his pursuit brought him back down to the mud. He was humbled.

What is humility, though? There’s a riddle: “what is the one thing that you may have, and the moment you say you have it, it is gone and you have it no more?” The answer is *humility*. But what really is humility?

We know that, in the parable today, the tax collector was humble and the Pharisee was not. We really could figure out who was going to come out on top in this story when it started. We’re used to hearing bad stuff about the Pharisees. As soon as Jesus begins the parable “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee...” we don’t need to hear anymore. We don’t even need to know who the other person is. If two people go to pray and *one* is a Pharisee, we are pretty sure the other one is going to get praised. We’ve heard these parables before – we know how this works by now. But let’s take a step back. What did the Pharisee really do wrong? He says that he’s glad he’s not a thief, a rogue, or an adulterer. What’s wrong with that? He next points his

finger at the tax collector and says he's glad he's not like him, either. Well, the tax collectors really were some not-so-nice people. They were Jews who were working with the Roman authorities to tax their fellow Jews. They routinely overcharged their own people and pocketed the excess. Tax collectors were definitely not the epitome of virtue, and this Pharisee said he's glad he isn't like that, either. Then, he says that he fasts twice a week and tithes on all of his income. That's going above and beyond the duty of a Jew. The Mosaic law only stipulates one fast day a year: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This man fasts *twice a week*! And Jews really only had to tithe on certain parts of their income, but he tithes on everything. Jesus doesn't say any of this is not true. There's no indication the Pharisee is a liar. He obeyed the laws and even went above and beyond the call of duty. We hear "Pharisee" and think he's a bad guy; when he really was a model Jew.

Now, as for the tax collector, as I've mentioned, he was *not* a model Jew. Everything we know of tax collectors in Jesus' day is negative. They were not moral or religious. They were thieves. Next week, we'll talk a bit about Zacchaeus, a tax collector whose home Jesus visits while the people grumble about Jesus visiting with this "sinner." So, the two characters in this story are one who is the very model of a religiously observant person and one who is the very model of an immoral scoundrel. So, let's think about this parable another time and try to do so *without* preconceived notions – which of these guys do we think Jesus will praise? It would have to be the Pharisee, right? And if we are honest, isn't that really who we *want* Jesus to praise? Isn't that really who we are closer to? Do you identify more with the religiously observant person who follows the rules or the immoral thief? Don't we really want Jesus to praise the Pharisee because that's who we are closer to in this story?

Of course, that's not what happens, much to this surprise of the original hearers of the story. Why is that? We have to look back at the introductory statement for this parable. Luke tells us at the beginning what this one is about. Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in

themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” The parable is for those who *trust in themselves* and *regard others with contempt*. The Pharisee *did* seem to be doing everything right. He *was* following all of the rules. His main problem was that he was *trusting in himself* and *regarding others with contempt*. The translation of the Bible that we read from this morning, the NRSV, says “The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus...” Other versions are more pointed. The New American Standard Bible says “The Pharisee stood and was praying this *to himself*...” The Darby Bible translation says “The Pharisee, standing, prayed thus *to himself*...” He wasn’t even really praying to God. Joachim Jeremias, one of the greatest interpreters of the parables of Jesus, says that the phrase “standing by himself” can be translated “took up a prominent position.” So, the Pharisee went to the Temple, found a prominent position where everyone could see him, and he prayed, not to God, but to himself, and really for the benefit of all of those around. Ah, now we can see the problem! He was like Yertle the Turtle, exalting himself. He was at the Temple not to pray to God or praise God, but so that he would be seen by others, who would praise him for all his wonderful works. Yes, he fasted and tithed and followed the law. He did all the right things, but for all the wrong reasons. And then, he had contempt for the tax collector who came to the temple.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knew of his bad deeds. He knew what kind of person he had been. And he stood far off, not in a prominent position, but far off. And he beat his chest in despair, crying out to God, “Have mercy on me, for I am a sinner!” The tax collector knew that he did not measure up to God’s standard. The Pharisee looked only to others – he compared himself to thieves, rogues, adulterers, and tax collectors. Compared to them, yes, the Pharisee looked quite good. The tax collector, though, thought instead about how he fared in *God’s* eyes. Neither of them – the tax collector or the Pharisee – stood up to *God’s* standard, and neither do we.

And yet, aren't we tempted to think more highly of ourselves than of others? For many of us, there are a variety of ways that we look down our noses at others. Aren't we a bit tempted to exalt ourselves? Aren't we trusting in ourselves and regarding others with contempt? Isn't Jesus' parable meant for us?

We need to thank God for the strength, energy, and will to be here this morning, and realize it's not about us. We are here to do what God wants us to do and that's all about God, and not about us. We are here because God has allowed us to be, and that's all about God, and not about us. The Pharisee was praying to himself. He believed that the source of his strength and devoutness was himself. He did not realize that everything comes from God.

C.S. Lewis gives us a metaphor. Suppose a six-year-old girl says "Daddy, may I have \$5 to buy you a Christmas present?" The father, of course, gives the child the money, and then on Christmas morning, will express great joy and delight over whatever the child bought. But it would be absurd to say that, by virtue of the gift, the father came out \$5 ahead on the deal. All that we are able to do for God is as a result of God's grace and gifts to us. What we do for God is possible only because he has given us the "\$5" in the first place. When we grow in faith and our deeds for others are good, we are reflecting the light that God has shone on us. We cannot take all of the credit for our good deeds. We must give credit, praise, and glory to God. When we, like the Pharisee, compare ourselves to others, our focus is in the wrong place. Our focus must be on God, who gives us the ability to respond to His grace. And if we want to compare ourselves to someone, we've got someone who came and walked among us on this earth, about whom we read in Hebrews 4: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." We'll quickly see that we do not compare very favorably to the standard of Jesus.

So, all those who exalt themselves will be humbled. They will be King of the Mud. But Jesus goes on...He says "all who humble themselves will be exalted." *True* humility is what we should seek. It is a paradox of the faith, but it is true. If we humble ourselves here on earth, one day we will be exalted in the presence of God almighty. One day, we will see God face to face. Until then, we must be humble. For it is only when we are emptied of all of our human strivings and darkness, that we can be filled with God's goodness and light. It is then that God can do more and more amazing things through each of us, and through this part of the body of Christ known as First Presbyterian Church. Thanks be to God. Amen