



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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**✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN. ✠**

People often seem to find it hard to come to grips with today's message from St. Luke: the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. This is surprising, perhaps. After all, the parable doesn't seem unduly complicated: Two men are praying in the Temple – one a Pharisee, a sect often condemned as hypocritical by Jesus; the other from a class of people regarded by all practicing Jews as sinners beyond contempt: tax collectors.

The Pharisee, instead of getting on with his prayers, spends his time comparing the publican unfavorably with himself. The tax collector, by contrast, can't so much as bring himself to look up to heaven. He stares at the ground, beating his breast, saying: "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

Jesus tells his audience of Pharisees: "I tell you, [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone that exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Most of us think we understand this parable. So did an earnest young man from the Jewish "cognitive elite, who stood by listening intently. "Good rabbi," he asked, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why are you calling me good?" asked Jesus, "The only one that is good is God."

He was pointing out to the young man that he was asking a question beyond human understanding, a question that could only be answered by God. Jesus then proceeded to answer the question – effectively proclaiming his divinity, something that went right over the young guy's head.

"You know the commandments . . ." Jesus said, "Do not commit adultery. Do not commit murder. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and your mother . . ." All these commandments deal with our duty to our fellow men. Not one of them deals with our duty to God, himself. Jesus was telling the young guy it is a lot easier to worship God in than it is to obey his commandments about how we should treat our fellow men.

It isn't, after all, inherently difficult to confine oneself to worshipping only the one true God; to avoid making graven images or taking his Name in vain, and keeping the Sabbath holy. By contrast, being nice to folks you despise, or who treat you badly is very, very difficult.

But the young man missed this point entirely. Instead, he was outraged by what he regarded as a rehearsal of the obvious. Going immediately to the wrong end of the stick, he grasped it firmly with both hands.

"All these commandments I have kept from my youth," he spluttered indignantly.

This young man had good reason to assert he had always honored the commandments. Religious Jews of his day went to extraordinary lengths to fulfill their divinely imposed obligations to his neighbors. The remarkable record of Jewish generosity to the community we see in our nation today arises in large part from a tradition of philanthropy established in the Law of Moses. Few people have historically been more generous to their neighbors.

The rich young man undoubtedly gave generously to community projects and public charities. He undoubtedly supported his synagogue and tithed to the temple. He undoubtedly gave generously to the relief of the poor and never allowed a beggar to pass his gates hungry or naked. By any human standard, he was remarkably openhanded. But there is a world of difference between giving alms and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. The young man kept the commandments to the letter, but not always in the spirit.

The Pharisee in the parable credited God for all his virtues. He gave him thanks for the tender conscience that kept him on the straight and narrow. He didn't take credit for himself. He humbly attributed his piety and generosity to God's grace, not to his own efforts.

The publican, by contrast, had much to repent. He was a traitor both to his religion and his nation. Jews at the time regarded tax money as a form of worship. Tax was called tribute and tribute could be paid only to God. A Jew who collected taxes for Caesar was committing both blasphemy and treason.

But tax collectors were despised not only for that. The Romans had an exceedingly effective tax collection system. They put it out to collection agencies. The agents bid for the job of collecting taxes in a community. Anything they raised over and above their bid was money in their pockets.

Publicans in the Roman Empire used similar methods of squeezing cash from the recalcitrant as our modern collection agencies. Their penalties, however, included flogging, enslavement and the arena. Small wonder all classes of people, rich and poor, pagan and pious, hated them with a passion.

Jesus is telling us in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican that the Pharisee sinned by imagining he could see into the heart of another person and pass judgment on him. The publican was indeed guilty of being unjust. Certainly, he was an extortioner. He may well have accepted sexual favors in lieu of taxes owed. But at the time he was in the temple, he was standing before God, repenting his sins and begging forgiveness. In measuring his own sins against those of the publican, the Pharisee was not only discounting his own need of repentance, but, in passing judgment on the publican, he was usurping God's job.

This parable is particularly aimed at churchgoers. We may be generous to people outside our church community – the homeless, the impoverished people of the third world, victims of natural disasters – but we are by no means always as openhearted to fellow Christians, even to members of our own churches.

We often devote more time than we should to the theological shortcomings, real and imagined, of other branches of the faith. We are often less than generous to Christians who do not share our political opinions. And the worst thing about these internecine disputes is they are often pursued with less charity than similar quarrels in the secular world – giving unbelievers the opportunity of denouncing us as hypocrites.

The Anglican writer and thinker C. S. Lewis once observed that the devil does his best work on the chancel steps. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Jesus tells us that the best way defeat the devil's efforts to subvert the church is to credit is to treat everyone with same degree of charity as we would want for ourselves. *AMEN.*