



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Eleventh Sunday After Trinity, August 31st, 2014

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

From the way Jesus talks about them, you would be forgiven for thinking that the Pharisees were the villains of the New Testament. After all, he calls them some pretty horrible names: hypocrites, whited sepulchers, blind guides ... In fact, he doesn't seem to have a good word to say about them.

However, by human standards, the Pharisees were actually the good guys of their time. In fact, they were people just like ourselves. To grasp this, it's important to understand that Christianity is a very Jewish religion. Indeed, it could not be otherwise – for the New Testament is the lens through which God's revelation in the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament is fully revealed.

Jesus' attitude towards the Pharisees should, thus, cause deep disquiet among folks struggling to be good Christians. After all, the Pharisees went unailing to church (synagogue) every Sabbath. They conscientiously studied the Scriptures, trying to discern God's will. They tithed everything and they gave regularly to charity. If they managed to get into Jesus' bad books, may be we are running the same risks.

Today's Gospel reading – St. Luke's account of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican – gives us an insight into where they (and, of course, us) frequently go wrong: Two men are praying in the Temple – one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector, an occupation decent people at the time regarded as beyond contempt.

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, this man [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 a young man from the Jewish "cognitive elite," who was listening intently. "Good rabbi," he asked, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He was, in fact, young man I spoke about last week.

"Why are you calling me good?" asked Jesus, "The only one that is good is God." The point he was making is the young man was asking a question only God could answer. 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 . . ." 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.

Now the young man actually had good reason to claim 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 human standards, he was remarkably openhanded. But there is a world of difference between giving alms to the needy and loving your neighbor as much as you love yourself. The young man kept the commandments to the letter, but not always in the spirit.

The Pharisee in the parable credits God for all his virtues. He gave him thanks for the tender conscience that keeps him on the straight and narrow. He doesn't take credit for himself. He humbly attributes 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 solely for that. The Romans had an exceedingly effective tax

collection system. They farmed it out to agents. 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.

In this parable, Jesus warning us against imagining we can judge other people by just looking at them. The Pharisee sinned by imagining he could see into the heart of the publican, then dismissing his obvious repentance as unworthy and insincere.

The publican was doubtless guilty of being unjust. He was probably an extortioner. He might well have accepted sexual favors in lieu of taxes owed. But in the temple, he was standing before God, repenting his ugly behavior 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 – doing God's job for him.

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 dwell far more than we ought on minor theological differences. We are frequently less than kind to Christians whose politics are different from ours. We often act as though we have a monopoly on morality. And the ugliness with which we pursue our vendettas enables unbelievers, quite rightly, to denounce us as hypocrites.

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