

# The Virtuous Life

*Luke 18:9-14*

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9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." <sup>13</sup>But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

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They say that confession is good for the soul. And in this season of Lent, we intentionally focus on our need for a new and right spirit. That's why this morning, on this second Sunday of Lent, I need to come clean. I must admit that I have a nemesis. Well, actually I have two nemeses: Tom Brady and LeBron James.

Tom Brady is the six time Super Bowl-winning quarterback for the New England Patriots. LeBron James is a NBA Superstar, currently playing for the Los Angeles Lakers. They are quite accomplished athletes; highly skilled and at the top of their individual sports. But when Brady takes the field or LeBron enters the court, you can count on one thing. I will be rooting for the other team.

I'm not completely sure how Brady and LeBron ended up on the “archenemy end” of my sports spectrum. I don't think it was so much what they did at first, but more about who they weren't. I was a Peyton Manning guy. And, LeBron will always take a backseat to Michael Jordan in my book. So, given that every time Tom Brady or LeBron James played a game, they posed a threat to the brilliance of "my guys," well, they became my nemeses.

However, as a part of my contrition and penance program, I must admit that as the years have gone along, I have developed a grudging respect for both men. And part of what has caused this respect is the fact that they are doing what they are doing - competing at such a high level - when they should be slowing down; when their athletic prowess should be diminishing. Yet, there's 41-year-old Tom Brady leading a Super Bowl winning drive just a few weeks ago. And, although this year will be likely be an exception, LeBron has been a part of the last eight NBA Finals (in a sixteen year career). These guys win...and they do so even though they have a lot of miles on their bodies.

What makes them good and allows them to win is not just one practice. They didn't become elite just by throwing passes or shooting free throws. What I've come to admire about these two athletes is the discipline they exhibit in their training. LeBron works out five days a week – seven days a week during the season. He can be found working out on a step climber, practicing Pilates, and participating in spin classes. He also eats really well.

There are no pies or pizza, sandwiches or French fries in his regular diet. Instead, it's chicken, salad, veggies, a protein shake, and fruit.<sup>i</sup>

Tom Brady works out and eats well, but he also focuses on muscle pliability, hydration, and cognitive wellness. Supposedly, this regimen has allowed Brady to have the same performance at age 40 as he did 10 or 15 years before.<sup>ii</sup> And other than the fact that Brady recommends avocado ice cream, I'm intrigued by his approach and his discipline. Because, I want to be in the same shape both he and LeBron find themselves in today.

This morning, we are in week two of our Lenten Worship Series, *A Spiritually Full Life*, and this morning we are focusing in on a virtuous life. Sometimes, we view our approach to spirituality just like athletic training. We think we can shape up, improve, and strengthen our virtues in the same way we enhance our athletic skills. In fact, both the fourth century bishop, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and the great Protestant reformer, John Calvin, likened our desire for a virtuous life to that of an athletic contest. Self-denial and vigorous spiritual exercise, they suggest, are just part of the training program.

It would be easy to stick with this analogy and to tell you to go start training – to turn the rest of this sermon into a workout session with me as your coach. “Prayer-2-3-4, Scripture-2-3-4, Come on...let me see more acts of service. You can do it!” And this kind of training will definitely pay dividends. But, before you start, if you are training for the spiritual life – if you are wanting to achieve peak performance, you need to heed the warning found in our scripture lesson this morning from Luke.

Chances are, this isn't the first time you've heard this parable. And even if you didn't know this one, you probably made judgments fairly quickly about what was being said. If you have any familiarity with Luke's gospels, it's expected that you would recognize the Pharisee as a devout person and the tax collector as a stereotypical sinner. You would also know that Pharisees are regularly portrayed in the gospels as Jesus' nemeses. They are the Klingons to his star fleet. As such, we all too easily judge the Pharisee to be a self-righteous hypocrite. We quickly assume that the moral of this story is to be humble. And this seems to be the case given the interpretive brackets Luke places at the beginning and end of this story.

It's also not an accident that this exchange takes place at the Temple. On the grounds of the Temple, you were always aware of who you were, of what status you had, of what you could expect from God.<sup>iii</sup> The Pharisees understood this. In fact, they saw themselves as God's biggest fans. And in Jesus' day, if the rabbis ever got together for a meeting of the "local Rabbi association," a rabbi might puff out his chest and brag about having a synagogue full of Pharisees. They were the most devout. They were the most faithful and dependable Jews. They were the ones who went above and beyond in their spirituality.

Jewish law only prescribed one obligatory fast, which was on the Day of Atonement. However, those who wished to gain special merit also fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. These were the "market days" when Jerusalem was full of people. Those were likely to be the Pharisees. Now, of course, some

took their devotion too far. Some of those who fasted whitened their faces and appeared in disheveled clothes – to give their piety the biggest possible audience.<sup>iv</sup> Their public displays were condemned by Jesus on more than one occasion.

It's possible that this is what was happening again in our parable this morning. The Pharisee, standing in the Temple, stood apart from all the others, probably so that his litany of virtues can be heard by other worshipers and by the tax collector. And what we quickly learn from his prayer is that he is self-serving. He's absorbed in his own virtue.

The Pharisee asks nothing of God in his prayer. He presumes that he is not a sinner and that his fasting and tithing are ample evidence of his piety. As he prays, there is no sign of humility or contrition before God. Instead, he came to the Temple to inform God how good he was.

Meanwhile, also present was a tax collector. Working for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people, a participant in a cruel and corrupt system, politically a traitor, religiously unclean, a publican was a reprehensible character. If anyone within the community of Judaism would not go home from the temple justified, it would seem to be a tax collector.<sup>v</sup>

Yet, here was this tax collector – the one whom the Pharisee mentioned in his prayer – the one he didn't want to be like. The tax collector was “beating his breast” – a physical gesture in that day more often associated with women than men. In the same way, instead of looking towards the heaven, he keeps his head bent. His words are simple. He does not embark on an eloquent

litany of his sins to match the Pharisee's virtues. In fact, the tax collector isn't so much humble as desperate.<sup>vi</sup> And so, he offers a simple prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

The parable serves up two behaviors that are out of character. The first is that the Pharisee prays in a self-righteous manner.<sup>vii</sup> As bad as we want the Pharisees to be, this wasn't their usual behavior. After all, it isn't that the Pharisee is speaking falsely, but rather that the Pharisee misses the true nature of his blessings. He has trusted in himself. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own actions and being. And in the process, he missed something. A key something. His religion drove him away from the tax collector rather than toward him.<sup>viii</sup> His deep love of God had been completely separated from love of neighbor.

The second behavior that is out of character is the fact that the tax collector prays at all. Because we are so quick to turn the Pharisee into Jesus' opposition, we tend to align ourselves with the tax collector. And there's no doubt that the tax collector – the one who recognizes that he has nothing to depend upon but God's mercy – seems to "get it." He understands that he can't earn his righteousness. That's one key point of this parable.

But, as William Muehl points out, the tax collector looks good because he is in a two-person lineup and the other person is one of our stock villains.<sup>ix</sup> But if we aren't careful, the tables can turn very quickly. We can become 'pharisaic' about the Pharisees. "Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self righteous, or even like that

Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to scripture, and we have learned that we should always be humble.”<sup>x</sup> If we don’t pay attention, we disciples and believers are just as vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness as the Pharisee in our scripture lesson.

Larry Osborne coined a phrase to define this phenomenon. He calls it becoming an Accidental Pharisee. Osborne described it like this:

*The journey to becoming an accidental Pharisee usually starts out innocently enough. It’s often triggered by an eye-opening event. Sometimes it’s a mission trip, a conference, or a powerful new book. Sometimes it’s a small group experience that makes everything else feel like you’ve just been playing church. Or perhaps it’s a new Bible teacher who opens your eyes to things you’ve never seen before.*

*So you step out in faith. You make some big changes. You clean up areas of sin and compromise. You add new spiritual disciplines as you excitedly race off toward the front of the following-Jesus line.*

*But as you press forward, it’s inevitable that you begin to notice that some people lag behind. And it’s at this point that your personal pursuit of holiness can morph into something dangerous: a deepening sense of frustration with those who don’t share your passionate pursuit of holiness.<sup>xi</sup>*

I suspect some of us have found ourselves in full membership at the club of accidental Pharisees. We really don't intend to be there. But, sometimes we are proud of our adherence to certain values. Sometimes, we secretly feel like our credentials and education and good intentions make me better than other people and more deserving of God's attention and salvation. So, over time, fewer and fewer people measure up to our definition of a genuine disciple. Unintentionally, but inevitably, being right becomes more important than being kind, gracious, or loving.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Luke takes pains to identify the true basis for righteousness and distinguish it from misplaced pride in obedience to God's commandments. The fastidiousness of the Pharisee is not condemned in itself, but it is indicative of a religious conscientiousness which can miss the point. But, we can't make "not being a Pharisee" the only lesson. To prevent us from becoming "accidental Pharisees" in our interpretation of this parable, we need to also consider the tax collector.

If this prayer was the only one this publican ever recited for the rest of his life, if the sense of unworthiness invaded and dominated all his thoughts and self-perception for the rest of his life, then he is the last person with whom we would want to identify. Because there is also a lesson about next steps for us to pull from this scripture. There comes a time when we need to trust that we are forgiven and accept divine grace – grace to move beyond regret, remorse, and acknowledgment of our sins into the arena of sanctification, being blessed to be a blessing to others. We can't do that if we are arrogant

like the Pharisee. Neither can we do it if we remain habitually mired in a sense of our unworthiness.<sup>xii</sup>

That's where humility comes in. The humility that Jesus commends at the end of our scripture lesson isn't just about modesty and an unassuming nature. No, as one of my doctoral professors, Alyce McKenzie, describes it, "True humility contributes to the dynamic of faith allowing the power of God to work through us."<sup>xiii</sup> That power of God is the spirit moving us ever forward in a process of sanctification.

Sanctification is the big church word for the process of leading a virtuous life. Having been justified – made righteous – by the saving acts of Jesus Christ on the cross, our responsibility as believers is to move towards holiness. Towards being, as Jesus described, perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. That's why the church throughout history has emphasized virtuous living. But what is virtuous living? Augustine described virtue is a good habit consonant with our nature. And Thomas Aquinas described it as an operative habit essentially good, as distinguished from vice, which is an operative habit essentially evil.

Virtues can be divided into intellectual, moral, and theological virtues. And we could spend weeks digging into these various virtues and how they are acquired. On one hand, an individual can acquire human virtues through his or her own effort. Through education, by deliberately choosing to do what is good, and through perseverance...these are ways a person acquires

and strengthens virtue. That’s the disciplined “workout” regimen of Christians.

But on the other hand, with the help of divine grace from God, the individual finds greater strength and facility to practice these virtues. It takes the grace of God to overcome our weaknesses. Only with God’s help can we forge the Christian character that motivates us to move towards being perfect like God is perfect.

There are things we can do to lead a virtuous life. This is not something just for the super religious, but for you and me, too. But, to prevent pride for overtaking that pursuit, we have to be in tune with God. We have to allow ourselves to be formed and shaped by God. And the way we do that is by recognizing that we need God’s mercy, just like that tax collector. But then we can’t stay in a state of unworthiness. We’ve got to live as the forgiven and loved people of God. In the end, that’s the kind of training that will really be good for our souls.

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<sup>i</sup> Shontell, Alyson and Justin Gmoser. “LeBron James Swears By This Unusual Workout Class to Keep in Shape” in *Business Insider*. October 25, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Flanagan, Graham. “I Went on the Tom Brady Diet and Workout Plan and It Changed My Life – Here’s What it was Like” in *Business Insider*. October 6, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Lose, David. “Commentary on Luke 18:9-14” in *Working Preacher*. October 23, 2016.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2967](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2967)

<sup>iv</sup> Barclay, William. “The Gospel of Luke” in *The Daily Study Bible Series*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975.

<sup>v</sup> Craddock, Fred. “Luke” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

<sup>vi</sup> Lose.

<sup>vii</sup> McKenzie, Alyce. “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector: Lectionary Reflection on Luke 18:9-14” in *Patheos*. October 12, 2010.  
<https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2010/10/pharisee-and-the-tax-collector>

<sup>viii</sup> Culpepper, R. Alan. “The Gospel of Luke” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. XI. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

<sup>ix</sup> McKenzie.

<sup>x</sup> Lose.

<sup>xi</sup> Osborne, Larry. *Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012.

<sup>xii</sup> McKenzie.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.