

Everything Is Grace **Luke 18:9-14**

Superhero movies?

Do you like superhero movies like Superman, Spiderman or Wonder Woman? I like superhero movies because they entertain my eyes and I don't have to think too much to understand the movie. There are bad guys and good guys. There will be explosions and destruction, and I don't know why but Time Square in New York City, is almost always blown up. Eventually, the good guy will beat the bad guy and there will be a happy ending! When we watch this kind of superhero action movie, we are excited because we identify ourselves with the good guys. If you see yourself on the side of the villain, a superhero movie will always be a sad movie for you. Because we are so familiar with this kind of good guy/bad guy, happy ending scenario, we tend to read the Bible similarly.

In today's scripture, Jesus speaks a parable. "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man." Yes. We have a good guy and a bad guy! The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.' He certainly looks down on others and speaks like an arrogant man.

Meanwhile, the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.' This poor tax man repents his sin! Who seems to be the bad guy in this story? The Pharisee. Who is the good guy? the tax man. Jesus said, "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." A good guy is exalted and a bad guy is humbled! A happy ending! The lesson from today's reading seems to be that we should be humble! But is it really?

The main problem with this simplistic, straightforward interpretation is that we are doing exactly the same thing that the Pharisee did in the story. "Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to Scripture, and we have learned that we should always be humble."¹ We look down on others, like the Pharisee in the parable did, don't we? This is exactly what the parable would seem to condemn! In order to avoid this kind of trap, we need to break our good guy/bad guy frame of reference when we read this parable.

The Pharisee, the righteous bad guy and the tax collector, the justified good crook?

To our ears, the Pharisee's prayer sounds like a bad example of public prayer. There are so many "I" statements and the denigration of other people. If I pray like this Pharisee did, I am sure that I will get a lot of complaints. Right? This prayer seems an example of hubris, which is considered the root cause of sin, and thus, we perceive this Pharisee as sinful or the bad guy in the story. But, biblical scholars have found many written prayers in Jesus' day and they are similar to this Pharisee's prayer. A model prayer from the Talmud goes like this:

"I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast given me my lot with those who sit in the seat of learning, and not with those who sit at the street corners; for I am early to work, and they are early to work; I am early to work on words of the Torah and they are early to work

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14>

on things of no moment... I run and they run; I run toward the life of the Age to Come, and they run toward the pit of destruction.”²

This was a prayer of gratitude. I know it still sounds strange to us, but we should not judge the Pharisee's prayer from our cultural framework and label him as a sinful hypocrite. Instead of judging him too quickly, let us assume that everything this Pharisee says is true. He has set himself apart from others for holy living and he is good in practicing his faith and observing holy laws. He fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all his income. By the standard Jesus might employ, he was righteous. He was not a bad guy. Of course, he was not perfect. The problem with this Pharisee was that he separated himself from others to the point of despising others. He seemed to divide people into two categories: the righteous and the immoral, and he was grateful that he belonged to the righteous. He also assumed that the tax collector had put himself beyond God's mercy and openly disdained him in his prayer. He was good, but not entirely good.

What about the tax collector? Is he really a good guy? Tax collectors in Jesus' time were more like the Mafia in “The Godfather” movie or worse. They directly served the enemy, the Roman empire, and also ruthlessly exploited the people of God. In short, they traded their conscience and religious identity for money. The tax collector was not a good guy at all. But he was a bad guy that knew he was bad! Barbara Brown Tylor said, “sin is our only hope, because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again.”³ This tax collector knew that he had done much to offend the law of Israel, so he relied upon the Lord's benevolence and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner!” He was bad but not entirely bad. We tend to separate good and bad but in reality, no one is entirely good or bad. So, in this parable, there is no bad guy or good guy to emulate.

This Parable is about a Wildly Merciful God

This parable is not about the bad Pharisee and the good tax collector. No! It's about God and God's boundless mercy. After telling this parable, Jesus said, “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other!” The original listeners of this parable might have been stunned because Jesus' parable upends their expectations, and so are we. God justified a dedicated crook so easily! Imagine the Charleston Church shooter saying, “God be merciful,” and with that quick and breathy prayer, receiving justification? It's offensive. It's outrageous that God shows mercy so easily to such an evil-doer. We might wonder, “What kind of God could whitewash such an evil person so easily? How come a totally corrupt villain is “justified” by God? But isn't it God's mercy that embraces us into God's family? We don't earn our justification through our efforts, but it was given to us as God's grace. We can stand here in this sanctuary because of God's grace. Everything is grace. Knowing that everything is God's grace keeps us from falling into the deadly trap of contempt for others as well as self-abasement.

A few weeks ago, Andrea Dunn shared a moving message during announcements! She invited you to join our Christmas Bazaar meeting and shared her experience when she first joined Asbury UMC. She hesitated to join any committees because she felt that she was new and didn't feel right or worthy to share her opinions. But we do God's work because of God's grace. Andrea said something to this effect “don't let your feelings of unworthiness to do this work block you from joining this committee!” That was the gospel message we heard on that day! No one is good enough to earn God's mercy and at the same time, no one is bad enough to be

² David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, 226.

³ Barbara Brown Tylor, *Speaking of Sin*, 59.

excluded from God's mercy. A wildly merciful God embraces us as God's family and empowers us to do the same.

Everything is God's grace. So, what we need to learn today is how to live life with such boundless mercy and grace of God. First, we need to remember that we are justified without qualification by the free and gracious love of God. It means that we are loved by God, no matter what. So, we should love ourselves as God loves us, and accept that God justifies others as well, including people who seem undeserving for God's mercy. Instead of dividing people into good or bad or any kind of groups, we can see them as beloved children. In this way, Asbury UMC can be an "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors" community of faith. And most of all, be grateful for God's grace so we can enjoy his gift for us.