

## Leadership and Humility

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Luke 18:9-14

It's funny how certain childhood memories return. In Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, a suburb of Akron, Ohio, there is a large tower emerging from the center of a large building. The building is a church, its huge tower serving the function of many church towers, and steeples, and the like.

I will tell you about the church in a minute, but what I remember about the building – located in the place where both of my sets of grandparents resided – was that it had a restaurant, a buffet. Once or twice I remember a grandparent, or perhaps an aunt, taking us to that restaurant. And because it was a buffet, and because this is a childhood memory, what I remember is the chocolate pudding, and lots and lots of chocolate pudding, so thinking that this was, perhaps, the best restaurant ever, pudding quality coming in a distant second over pudding quantity.

The restaurant was called the Cathedral Buffet, which leads me to the church itself. Do any of you remember a TV evangelist named Rex Humbard? Rex Humbard was in the generation of TV evangelists, faith healers, they were sometimes called, popular a generation or two ago. Humbard's ministry was based in Akron, and he built a huge church – the Cathedral of Tomorrow – that took up the Akron skyline and was his base of operation for a global ministry that included TV broadcasting and an auditorium that seated 5400 people. I never knew any of this until much later; all I knew was the chocolate pudding.

Humbard eventually moved his operations to South or North Carolina and sold the Cathedral of Tomorrow to another TV evangelist, a man named Ernest Angley, who renamed it Grace Cathedral. You might have caught Ernest Angley on TV, very late at night or early in the morning. He died recently at the age of 99.

Angley's mannerisms were easily mocked by comedians and others, as were Humbar's, to an extent.

The Cathedral Buffet is now permanently closed. Google tells me that Angley had a problem with paying taxes on it. Google also tells me that Humbar had his own financial problems with the IRS.

I thought about all of this – and not just the chocolate pudding of my youth – for a couple of reasons. This summer, when I was in Atlanta as part of my church visitation program, I drove by a huge church complex, one of many in Atlanta. I recognized it from TV – Creflo Dollar Ministries. Perhaps you have seen it on TV as well. It's a huge operation. Creflo Dollar – that's his real name – is a proponent of something called the "prosperity gospel," a theological position that states that God wants us to be financially prosperous, and that, conveniently, a pastor's financial success is a reflection of such a blessing. Dollar was involved in a Senate investigation about lifestyles and is well-known for his mansions and automobiles.

So I thought of Rex Humbar and Ernest Angley when I saw Creflo Dollar's church, and the generations of TV evangelists whose theology differs vastly from mine and whose material success is less a source of envy, from me, than a source of befuddlement.

We are in stewardship season, and though I am compensated more than adequately, it's not at the Rolls Royce, private jet, multiple mansion level. And though I believe in the power of prayer, and that healing can happen, and does happen, often in the form of medical science, I do not subscribe to faith healing in the manner practiced by certain TV evangelists. I worry, at times, about those who follow them, whose money and hope are invested in them. But I cannot criticize that.

Jesus tells a parable this morning. Notice what it's about: it was "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

Now I can't say for sure that TV evangelists, with lavish lifestyles and huge viewership, believe they are righteous, nor that they hold others in contempt. Neither can I question the motives of any of us, we who engage in ministry in lower profile situations, but perhaps with similar motives. Self-righteousness does

not have a price tag attached to it, nor does anyone's capacity to look at others with contempt come with a certain pay scale. But there is certainly ego involved in any of this, that I can tell you.

So Jesus tells a parable. Two go to pray. A Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee makes a big deal of his praying, thanking God that he was not like those losers. He fasts. He tithes, gives away a tenth of his income, which we presume is handsome. There is lots of sizzle to this guy, but as Jesus will have us understand, not much steak.

And then there is the tax collector. We can see where this is going, but we also need to understand that the tax collector's job was quite the unpopular one. He was essentially an agent for the empire, and often collected what was owed from very poor people, by any means necessary. Yet he knew. He knew. He stared at the ground, and, rather than bragging about his incredible piety, rather than announcing his big-time righteousness to all around, he simply begged to God for mercy, "be merciful to me, a sinner."

TV evangelists are easy targets, for all the reasons, and there is a cautionary tale here for them – if that's anything we pay attention to – or us, which we should pay attention to. Jesus says that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This parable is in a line of moments from Luke's gospel. One scholar calls it the "great reversal," a marked difference between the world's perception of what things look like and God's perception. You will remember the rich man and the poor man Lazarus, and their ultimate destination. Or Jesus telling a rich young man to sell all he had and give the money to the poor. Or the Zacchaeus incident – sharing dinner with a so-called "dirty" tax collector. A parable about slaves either hoarding investments or spending them lavishly. Turning the tables in the temple because of rampant profiteering. Another parable about inheritance – financial and otherwise. The widow's mite – giving from poverty rather than abundance. It's all there. The great reversal and our transformed perceptions.

Jesus knows the power of money, and not just faith healers on TV, in our culture, in our lives, in our faith. And this morning. The tables of perception are turned dramatically. Note that we do not learn what the tax collector gives – perhaps a tenth, but clearly a smaller amount than the Pharisee.

But what is interesting to consider is that Jesus uses the matter of money as an entry point for a deeper consideration of humility. Being humble is who we are when we are at our best. Who God calls us to be. We are not called to be doormats. Nor are we called to be falsely modest. But humble.

Charles Cousar contrasts the two: "...the Pharisee, who rehearses his virtues and downgrades others not measuring up..." and "the tax collector, whose petition is simple." The tax collector, Cousar says, "personifies the one essential prerequisite for praying – an honest recognition of our place before the justice and mercy of God." (*Texts for Preaching, Year A, pages 573-575*) The culture would say that the pharisee is the one to emulate. The church might even say that. But not Jesus.

Chelsey Harmon writes that it's easy to stereotype in this story; we know that "the Pharisee is going to be revealed as getting something warped, and that the underdog is going to be shown faithful."

It is not likely that our behavior will match that of the pharisee, that on Stewardship Sunday – November 20 – we will parade down the center aisle and announce our pledge with great fanfare. No. Remember, Harmon writes, that though the entry point to this is money – and we should pay attention to that, and to humility – and we should pay attention to that – Jesus tells this parable as one about trust. Who do we trust? Our money? Ourselves? Or God? And how do we live into the promise of that trust?

Harmon writes that the Pharisee "is not a thief or an adulterer, nor does he cheat people of their money. He participates in the religious rites of fasting and tithing, making sacrifices of his comfort. None of these activities are bad, and they are definitely not sinful in themselves." All good.

And yet. And yet. He compares himself to others, including the tax collector, who is right there. Harmon says that "The Pharisee views himself as set apart, not because of what God does for him, but by what he has accomplished himself."

Whatever the opposite of humility is – conceit, self-righteousness, vanity – the Pharisee has it. And what's tricky is that he has it while reflecting the kind of piety that we lift up.

Harmon writes: "Vainglory is that odd vice that takes a good thing and makes it bad. It spoils the fruit of righteousness in the Pharisee's life because it becomes

the seedbed of pride *in himself* and lessens his sense of how much grace from God he truly needs.”

The Pharisee ends up crediting himself for his success. The tax collector appealed to God for mercy. The first is a slippery slope. The second is that pathway to grace.

Reading this, as I said, in the midst of stewardship season, is kind of interesting. The Pharisee tithes. The lesson here is not, I repeat not, “don’t give.” It’s how we give, how we understand our response to God’s graciousness and generosity.

Jesus tells these big stories with out-sized characters and invites us to find ourselves in them. This morning, might we learn from each. And might we learn from each in nuanced ways. It’s not likely in our lives that we will be a full-on Pharisee or a full-on tax collector. Perhaps our sense of the Pharisee’s generosity can be met with a little self-awareness and humility. And perhaps our sense of the tax collector’s need for mercy can be met with some measure of self-esteem and understanding of our own intrinsic value. I do think we can find ourselves in this parable, responding generously to God’s grace, but with the right motivation, and calling on God for mercy and grace, from a position of God-given worthiness.

We are not TV evangelists, and as much as I am grateful for our livestream, that’s as close as I ever want to get. They are caricatures. But their world is our world, consumption, clicks and likes, outward expressions of success. Don’t trust that at all, Jesus is saying. Trust God, and live life as if you do. Amen.