

DEVOTIONAL

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS:
A PARABLE FOR OUR TIME

By Frances Lee Menlove

TODAY I AM going to tell you a story. This is a Jesus story, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which Jesus told to some people who trusted their own righteousness and regarded others with contempt.

I'm a grandmother, and I've learned that not only are stories important but they also can be adjusted to meet the occasion. One of my grandson's favorite stories is "The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig."

So, I will first tell this parable as it appears in the Gospel of Luke and then take some liberties. I'm allowed to do this because I'm a grandmother.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

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!"

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. (Luke 18:10-14, RSV)

Remember the audience here. Jesus was talking to people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18:9, RSV). Perhaps this parable is speaking to us in these contentious times.

A parable is a made-up story with a pow-

erful theological punch, but this story is so familiar to us, we know the ending and have successfully moralized the sting out of it.

We reject arrogance and self-righteousness and have identified ourselves with the tax collector. The jolt is gone. We even think of self-righteousness when we simply hear the word "Pharisee." But that is not the way an audience in Jesus's day would have heard it.

Pharisees were respected citizens. They were devoted to serving God, though they tended to apply the Mosaic Law less rigidly than did the Sadducees. It was the Pharisee Gamaliel who defended the apostles before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34-40). Pharisees represented righteousness and justice and the laws of Moses. They studied God's word and urged people to live right.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were despised. Tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman occupation forces. They would agree to collect a given amount in taxes, and their profit came from whatever they were able to collect in excess of that. This system lent itself to corruption and extortion. Self-interest bent the tax collectors toward dishonesty. The more toll collected, the more profit made. And all this with the support of the Roman occupation. The money taken from the Jewish citizens went to the Roman government, which some Jews felt approached blasphemy—gathering taxes to keep the pagan occupiers in power. Tax collectors were traitors and unclean.

Now, can you hear the punch in the ending? The good guy in this ancient culture is the Pharisee, but the Pharisee is the anti-hero in the story. And the tax collector went home right with God—without even being told to change occupations.

Pretend for a moment the parable said: "Two men went into the Church to pray—

one, a bishop, the other, a Hell's Angel. The bishop prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—that Hell's Angel over there, for example. I fast, I pay my tithe, I do my temple work and am a bishop to boot." The Hell's Angel prays, "Have mercy on me a poor sinner." The Hell's Angel goes to his home made right with God, but not the bishop!"

That story stings. We wince hearing it. Remember, our imaginary bishop is doing the right things, fasting, tithing, and obeying the commandments. The problem is all in his attitude, his sense of self-righteousness.

WHY does Jesus take self-righteousness with such deadly seriousness? Why does this one negative trait—self-righteousness—trump all the Pharisee's positive ones? I think there are a couple of reasons.

First, self-righteousness is the bane, the destroyer of human relations. Self-righteousness depends absolutely on a division of humanity into "us" and "them." I can't be up unless you are down. Contempt for others is always a partner of self-righteousness. The reason is clear. Pride is not accidentally, but essentially, competitive. This way of thinking about human relationships, in terms of "us" and "them," was anathema to Jesus. Jesus was constantly and consistently inclusive. He went out of his way to make non-Jews heroes of his stories. Jesus kept company with outcasts.

Nowhere did Jesus make his feelings about this issue clearer than with the second great commandment—to love our neighbor as ourselves. Self-righteousness leads directly to disdain for our neighbor, which short-circuits love.

The Gospel of Matthew adds a further warning: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3-4, RSV)

There is another ugly side of self-righteousness—the inability to be self-critical. If we are totally convinced of our own righteousness, self-examination is not necessary.

Listen to this old aphorism: "A surplus of virtue is more dangerous than a surplus of vice." "Why?" we ask naturally. "Because a surplus of virtue is not subject to the constraints of conscience."¹ Being on the side of right can delude us into believing anything is justified because of our relative moral superiority. The history of religion-fueled hate and killing and oppression is horrific. Religion-



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based self-righteousness has fed Crusades, jihads, Inquisitions, and witch trials.

Thus, self-righteousness not only warps interpersonal relationships, impeding love of neighbor; it also deadens the need for self-reflection.

NOW, I would like to take another liberty with this parable.

What if the Pharisee had prayed, “God, I thank thee that my country is not as others are, those other faltering nations and those other countries of evil-doers.”

Or, let’s push this further. (Remember, I’m a grandmother.) Let’s add one small, but por-

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tentous flourish: “God, I thank thee that my country is not as others are, and God, I thank thee, that you, Lord, are on our side.”

This prayer, presumably one of thanksgiving, carries dangerous temptations. This type of self-righteousness fosters American exceptionalism, making God into a kind of mascot for the nation. It feeds a civil theology that undergirds the notion that we are exempt from the rules that apply to everyone else.

The self-righteousness of a nation is as crippling to international relations as individual self-righteousness is to interpersonal relationships.

How, then, should we love our country?

How do we avoid the most grievous temptation of self-adulation? How do we avoid cheap patriotism?

William Sloane Coffin says there are three kinds of patriots—two bad, and one good. “The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.”² Good patriots love their country enough to address its flaws. Bad patriotism would be the self-righteous patriotism of our imaginary Pharisee.

“How do you love America?” Reverend Coffin asks. Don’t say, “My country, right or wrong.” That’s like saying, “My grandmother, drunk or sober.” It doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag, and don’t burn it, either. Wash it; make it clean.”³

The prophets of the Bible were self-critical. They paid little heed to the sins of Babylon. Jesus was self-critical. He paid little attention to the evils of Rome. All of them, prophets and Jesus, loved Israel enough to address Israel’s flaws. As we should in our own countries.

“Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.” As people of faith, we have a moral obligation to raise difficult questions. Christianity is not synonymous with the celebration of American prosperity and freedom. The evangelical Jim Wallis goes so far as to ask us, “How did the faith of Jesus come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and pro-American?”⁴ The vision of a uniquely virtuous nation belies the gospel teaching that the line between good and evil runs not between nations, but inside every human heart.

St. Augustine reminds us to never fight evil as if it were something arising totally outside of ourselves. We remember Paul’s admonition that all have sinned and fallen short. The temptation is to say *some* have sinned and fallen short. Remember also the scene at the Last Supper (Mark 14:19) when Jesus told the apostles around the table that one of them would betray him. The reaction of the apostles was not, “Oh, no! We have been infiltrated by an evil-doer!” The response was immediate self-examination. “Surely, not I?” they asked. They did not point fingers at each other but looked inside themselves. They understood the inner con-

flict of good and evil in each of us. At that last supper, the apostles did not externalize evil and make it something “out there.” They owned the struggle.

Self-righteousness diminishes our capacity for self-criticism as a nation, just as it does with individuals. Reinhold Niebuhr, warning about the perils of national pride, said the “good fortune of America and its power place it under the most grievous temptations to self-adulation.”⁵

The conviction that our convictions are universal, that those who disagree with us are patently wrong, and that our convictions are God’s will and should therefore guide public policy without criticism are fundamental temptations of a lived faith. Pascal said that humans never do evil as completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.⁶

Mormons have a wonderful gift. Virtually all our wards are sprinkled with returned missionaries who have lived in other countries, learned other languages, and become a beloved part of other church families. They can hear the hollowness of the insistence that there are none as great as we are and the perversity of externalizing evil to those out there and far away. This diversity of experience and background is a gift to our congregations, a gift that should be kept alive in our storytelling. This gift should be cultivated, encouraged, and celebrated as a powerful antidote to American self-righteousness.

But then, how should we invoke God or religion in our political life? Rather than following the way of the Pharisee and invoking God to justify ourselves and bless all our policies and actions, assured that God is on our side, that we are good and they are evil, let us choose another way. Let us ask God to hold us accountable, to put us under judgment, and to show us our sinfulness and our trespasses.

The Pharisee’s way leads to triumphalism and a sense of a divine mandate for our foreign policy. It leads, in effect, to a theology of empire. It is from this posture that President Bush can announce that the purpose of this country is “to rid the world of evil” and can repeat frequently that “our nation is the greatest force for good in history.”⁷

The second way, asking God to hold us accountable, led Lincoln to say, after the Civil war, that all had failed. All have sinned. The terrible war is a consequence of our failures and sins before God.⁸ Lincoln did not divide the nation into the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” good on the side of the Union and bad on the side of the Confederacy. Lincoln’s understanding is profoundly biblical.

So how then should we invoke God in our political life? We do not pray to enlist God in our projects but to examine ourselves—to change and to do God’s will.

YOU and I can’t leave this parable just yet. We must acknowledge the disturbingly ironic trap in our story that snags all of us.

What do you think of this prayer? “God, I thank you that I am not like that hypocritical, self-righteous Pharisee in our gospel parable.” The smug trap. This parable of the two people who enter the temple to pray leaves no one of us untouched. We all engage in disparagement. Self-righteousness is one of the fundamental temptations of a lived faith.

It is so easy, so natural, even so satisfying to feel self-righteous. We are often smug. We are pretty sure that our views are advanced and others’ views are outmoded. When everyone else grows up, we believe, they will think like us. Or, if those “others” weren’t so stupid or selfish or weak, they would think like us.

John Ortberg said, “This is a struggle inside every human being who seeks to take faith seriously. There is self-righteousness in me that does not want to die. And there is something inside me that is not bothered when others are excluded, that wants others to be excluded, that feels more special when I’m on the inside and somebody else is not. There is something in me that enjoys thinking about how much wiser and more loved by God I am than those foolish, exclusive Pharisees.”⁹

Let’s remember that Jesus addressed this parable to a specific group of people, to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else (see Luke 18:9). That sounds to me like it is special delivery to us, now, here in the U.S.A.

Both individuals and nations are at their worst when, persuaded of their superior virtue, they crusade against the vices of others. Both individuals and nations are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity

I WILL end now with both a prayer and a blessing. The prayer is adapted from Reinhold Niebuhr.

First the prayer:

Lord, we pray this day mindful of the sorry confusion of our world. Look with mercy upon this generation of your children so steeped in misery of their own contriving, so far strayed from your ways and so

blinded by passions. We pray for the victims of tyranny, that they may resist oppression with courage. We pray for the wicked and cruel, whose arrogance reveals to us the sin of our own hearts.

We pray for ourselves who live in peace and quietness, that we may not regard our good fortune as proof of our virtue, nor rest content to have our ease at the price of others’ sorrow and tribulation.

We pray for all who have some vision of your will, that they may humbly and resolutely, plan for and fashion the foundations of a just peace. Amen.¹⁰

And finally some words to keep us company. This is a Franciscan blessing. A blessing I also offer for my grandchildren, who have made me eligible for the title of “Grandmother.”

The blessing:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them, and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.¹¹

NOTES

1. Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 51.

2. William Sloane Coffin, *A Lover’s Quarrel with America*, VHS (New York: Old Dog Documentaries, Inc.).

3. William Sloane Coffin, *Untitled Sermon*, audiotape of lecture presented at the Riverside Church, New York City, October 5, 2003.

4. Jim Wallis, “Recovering a Hijacked Faith,” *The Boston Globe*, 13 July 2004.

5. Reinhold Niebuhr made this comment in 1950. Quoted in D.B. Robertson, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1957), 97.

6. Quoted in Coffin, “A Lover’s Quarrel With America.”

7. George W. Bush in an address from the pulpit at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., 14 September 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-2.html> (accessed 19 September 2004). President Bush has frequently stated that “our nation is the greatest force for good in history,” including in a speech in the White House East Room to the USA Freedom Corp on 6 July 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/07/20020730-5.html> (accessed 19 September 2004). In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, Bush said the “nation was the greatest force for good on this earth,” <http://www.georgew-bush.com/News/Read.aspx?ID=3422> (accessed 19 September 2004).

8. See Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

9. John Ortberg, *Christian Century*, 120, no. 17 (23 August 2003): 20.

10. *The Complete Book of Christian Prayer* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996), 165.

11. http://www.vtcucc.org/mission/DOM/franciscan_prayer.htm.



ALMANAC, 1997

The names have vanished
from the pages,
as if the Songin mine still sings,

but there remains a marble mark
in Portage Pennsylvania,
weathered with the winds
of fifty-seven winters
and the whispers of children,

sixty-three at once,
as quickly as the timbers snapped,
shut the narrow shafts of life,
ripped the bare electric lines
the simple yellow bulbs,
sixty-three into the quiet dust.

They burn among us still
like the black rock bits
they spent their miners’ breath to yield.

—JOHN P. KRISTOFKO