

*Thanksgiving Oil and Water*  
**Luke 18:9-14**  
**November 22, 2009**

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**First Christian Church**  
**Thanksgiving Sunday**

We all have things that really tick us off in traffic: Tailgaters, daredevil motorcyclists who ride like a bat out of hell, and drivers weaving in and out of traffic like they're racing at Indy.

But nothing ticks me off more than folks who refuse to slow down or move over into the next lane when I'm trying to get onto eastbound Dodge from the on-ramp at 156<sup>th</sup> Street. Never mind that failure to move over is actually against Nebraska Law. But rather than move over or slow down, these numbskulls will risk running me off the road or causing an accident. And after I think of a few other unkind names for them, I go theological and decide these yahoos operate with an *entitlement mentality*. I'll think these idiots behave like they *own the road*, entitled to whatever space they want to take because the rest of us are peons lucky to share the road with them!

Okay, so I get a little hot under the collar about this. I'm sure I'm not alone. Such driving is an unfortunate reminder that many, many people today operate with an entitlement mentality—that they deserve everything they get and a whole lot more!

It's how the Pharisee acted in today's passage, except he's even more forthright about it. As he goes to the temple to pray he says, "*I thank you, Lord, that I'm not like other people,*"<sup>1</sup> and then proceeds to list all the folk

he despises. I think that if God had answered the Pharisee in the parable God might've said, "Who made you king of the universe?" and added as he told Job, "*Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?*"<sup>2</sup>.

So, what is there about such an entitlement mentality, such an overbearing arrogance that gets under our skin and is of sufficient trouble that Jesus brings it up in this Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector? What relevance does it have on this eve of Thanksgiving Day?

Simply this: An entitlement mentality is anathema to a spirit of gratitude. Entitlement and gratitude are oil and water. They do not mix. So, if we have any hope of experiencing genuine thanksgiving ever, we first must set aside any sense we're entitled to anything, including God's grace! It's impossible to feel entitled and grateful at one and the same time!

Now, of course, because of all the anti-Judaism that infected western Christianity for many centuries, it's easy for us to pick on the Pharisee and just assume he's a bad guy. Except the really bad guy in the story is the tax collector! You don't see Pharisees ripping off peasant farmers to pay draconian Roman taxes. You don't see Pharisees foreclosing on homes when farmers couldn't pay, and then turning the property over to the rich. But the tax collector did, and worse!

Why, then, does Jesus applaud the tax collector and insult the Pharisee, who *did* pay his tithe and keep the commandments like a good Jew

should? In a word: **entitlement!** “*The Pharisee stood and prayed with himself.*”<sup>3</sup> He didn’t pray to God. He prayed to himself, as though he were God! Meanwhile, the tax collector, knowing his crime, beat his breast in shame and prayed, “*God, be merciful to be a sinner.*”<sup>4</sup>

The difference? The tax collector’s humility! He KNEW he didn’t deserve to be in the temple. It’s why he took the last pew. His humility was so in place that he felt all he could do was pray, “*Be merciful!*”

A woman in our church in Indianapolis was approached to be an elder. She backed off faster than a hand on a hot stove. But she was also intrigued. So she called me up one day and said, “I don’t feel worthy to be an elder,” despite the fact she had been devoted to the church in all the expected ways. As soon as I heard those words, “I don’t feel worthy,” that she felt she didn’t deserve to be an elder, I knew, ironically, that she was ready to be an elder, where humility is the chief requirement. Her humility fueled her gratitude that anyone would’ve even thought to ask her at all.

This is how Jesus saw the tax collector. He came to the temple as unworthy as anyone could ever be; and yet, Jesus says of him, “*this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.*”<sup>5</sup> It was his humility.

Thing is: it’s easy to forget that we all have a lot to be humble about. Take Warren Buffett. All his billions, and yet, what does he say regarding any entitlement to the wealth his wisdom and savvy investing have earned?

“I won the ovarian lottery.”<sup>6</sup> So did all of us born in this great land. Warren Buffett just says it with humor which, coincidentally, shares the same root as the word “humility.” Humility calls us back to one indisputable fact: We are all creations of God’s making. Not that humility is the same thing as humiliation. “Christian humility is not a cringing thing; it is based on the awareness of the *creatureliness*<sup>7</sup> of humanity. It is based on the belief that we are all children of God”. Truth is: “We must flee from the arrogance that allows us to think we somehow deserve what we have.”

A story suggests what I mean. Once upon a time there was a man who died and went to heaven. Just as he arrived, he noticed a large crowd gathering, so he asked St. Peter what it was all about. “Oh,” said St. Peter. “It’s show-and-tell time. People get to tell about memorable events in their lives on earth.” “Great,” said the man. “Do you think I could tell about the time there was a big flood in our town and I saved some people’s lives?” “Sure,” said St. Peter. “But remember that Noah will be in the audience.”<sup>8</sup>

For us, Jesus is in the audience. But Jesus never asks anything of us he didn’t ask of himself. The apostle Paul wrote, “*(Christ) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself.*”<sup>9</sup> I hear this scripture and think of Jesus answering a fan, “*Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone!*”<sup>10</sup> Jesus sets the template.

When we place ourselves at the center of the universe, we become self-promoters, self-idolaters. We take on an entitlement mentality and not only feel like we deserve all we have, including God's approval, as the Pharisee, but also start believing we deserve even more than we have!

And yet, gratitude grows from humility, not from a sense of entitlement. True humility acknowledges our dependence upon God's grace. After all, our word "gratitude" comes from the same root as the word "grace," "*gratia*." When the tax collector bows and beats his breast in repentance, what's the first word out of his mouth? God! "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"<sup>11</sup> Gratitude, you see, in spiritual matters, always assumes humility and humility always assumes there is Another above us, namely God, Who is the source of gift and grace in our lives!

Why, then, do so many people feel entitled and act so ungrateful? One is because we like to think we merit all we have. We want to believe everything we own, every virtue we possess, is something we have earned and deserve. But this closes us to God's grace, which can never be earned or merited, but must be given to remain grace.

A second reason is because we have been seduced by our belief in what's called "American exceptionalism." It's more than the kind of pride we feel when the "Star Spangled Banner" is played with Olympic athletes on the podium. It's a sense of national entitlement in which we pray silently,

“Thank you, Lord, we are not other nations;” or assume the rules are just for everybody else! While we are certainly free to believe we live in the greatest country on earth, it will not do for us to forget, as the hymn “This Is My Song” says, “other lands have sunlight too, and clover and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.”

I still remember it clearly. It was First Semester. 10<sup>th</sup> Grade. Shawnee Mission East. First Hour. I got a slip commanding me to report to the Vice-Principal’s Office. Uh-Oh! Don’t remember what I did wrong, but I went, nervously. It was Mr. Trask, a man I’d interviewed only months before in 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Career Study, when I pondered being a teacher. Mr. Trask also just happened to be my sister’s 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Math teacher. I took for granted all would be, well, well. Without knocking I waltzed, no burst, into Mr. Trask’s Office. Without looking up, he said sternly, go outside and knock this time before barging in here. I’d been a good boy ‘til then. Never really in trouble. Obeyed the commandments. Gave my all. Entitled. Securely spoiled. Thought I deserved mercy, without thanksgiving or gratitude.

That’s when Jesus shouted, “Surprise!” He looked at the penitent tax collector and said, “*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.*” I just had no idea the penalty for acting entitled was so stiff and the stakes for humility and gratitude were so high.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:11

<sup>2</sup> Job 38:4

<sup>3</sup> This is according to the old Revised Standard Version of this verse.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 18:13

<sup>5</sup> Luke 18:14

<sup>6</sup> Found in his autobiography, written by Alice Schroeder, *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and the Business of Life*, Bantam Books, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Italics not mine, from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, Phila: Westminster Press, 1975, p. 158.,

<sup>8</sup> As quoted by Janice W. Hearn, "Show and Tell Time," *Lectionary Homiletics*, Oct 2001, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:6

<sup>10</sup> Luke 18:19

<sup>11</sup> Luke 18:13