

Good News for Imperfect People

Two men went to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee prayed about his piety. Everything he said about himself was true. When he said, “I thank you that I am not like other men,” he was right. He had a standard of morality far above the standard of the day.

When he said, “I fast twice a week,” that was true. The Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday of every week. When he said, “I give tithes of all I possess,” he went beyond the Law of Moses. All Pharisees did that.

When he said, “I am not a crook,” he really wasn’t a crook. When he said, “I am not like this filthy tax collector,” he really wasn’t like that guy. When he said, “I do not commit adultery,” he really didn’t commit adultery. He was faithful to his wife. When he said, “I am zealous for my religion,” he meant it. He is a genuinely good man.

When he prayed to God, he was telling the truth. When he said in effect, “Lord, you’re lucky to have a guy like me, because I am one of the best guys I know,” it was true. He was a wonderful guy.

If this Pharisee were to come to Advent Church, we would love him because he would be faithful, loyal and give us a great deal of money. We would quickly nominate him for Vestry and eventually he would be Senior Warden. He is just that kind of guy. He looks exceptionally good on the outside. Everything he says about himself is true.

So, what’s wrong? Well, for all his goodness, he isn’t perfect, and in fact, he suffers from the worst sin in the Christian life, pride. His attitude is one of narcissistic righteousness.

He is like the fifth grader that came home from school so excited. She had been voted “the most talented person in the class.” The next day she was even more excited when she came home, for the class had voted her “the most likely to succeed.” The next day she came home and told her mother she had won a third contest, being voted “the most hardworking student in the class.”

But the next day she came home extremely upset. The mother said, “What happened, did you lose this time?” She said, “Oh no, I won the vote again.” The mother said, “What were you voted this time?” She said, “most stuck up.”

Well, this Pharisee would have won that contest without trouble. He had an “I” problem. Four times you will read the little pronoun “I” in his statements. He was obsessed with his own self. He suffered from two problems: inflation and deflation. He had an inflated view of who he was, and a deflated view of who God was. His pride made him too big to accept God’s grace and mercy.

The other person who went to the temple was a tax collector. He doesn’t even know how to pray. He doesn’t know what he is doing in the temple, or what he should do now that he’s in the temple. The tax collector knows that he has blown it. He has been put to the test and failed miserably. He knows that he is the bad guy in this story. He’s a crook, a turncoat, a rat, and a traitor to his own people. For years he has collected high taxes from struggling Jewish peasants, turned over the flat rate head tax to the Romans and kept the rest for himself. He is rich, but he’s guilty and ashamed, and with good reason. He bows his head, beats his breast and sobs with remorse. All he asks is mercy. Doesn’t even promise to shape up or do better or try harder. He just throws himself at God’s mercy and leaves it at that.

His prayer is not an exercise in self-promotion, but a confession and a plea for mercy. He is not selling himself; he is opening himself. And Jesus says, “I tell you this man [the tax collector] 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.”

To be justified means to be declared “not guilty.” The tax collector is declared to be in a right relationship to God while the Pharisee, who is so certain of his righteousness, is shown to be in a wrong relationship with God. He is not justified before the bar of God’s justice, while the miserable tax collector is. It’s not fair, is it? The good guy ends up being the bad guy, and the bad guy ends up being the good guy.

As I say, this is a shocker – for it goes against what we believe about the Christian faith. Talk to the average American Christian and he or she will tell you that Christian faith is about righteousness, morality and keeping the

rules. The tax collector shows none of this in his own life. He is unrighteous, immoral and has broken every rule in the book. He is as guilty as sin. No wonder he cannot stand up and pray. He can't look anyone, let alone God, in the eye. He knows his life is a mess, and that with his own strength and power he can do nothing about it. He doesn't have the slightest notion of fixing his life up, of shaping himself up and becoming organized. He can't bring any accomplishments of his own to God, not one.

That's the point, isn't it? That's what Jesus sees in this tax collector. He comes back repeatedly with his hands empty. He has nothing to bring, nothing to show, nothing to boast of, and he knows it.

Albert Schweitzer was the great missionary doctor to Africa and a foremost theologian. He was laboring one day in the hot African sun, building the hospital at Lambarene, Gabon. A large timber had to be raised into place, and try as he might, Schweitzer couldn't manage it. He looked up and saw a well-dressed African man standing in the shade of a tree and asked him to lend a hand. "Oh, no," the man said, I don't do that kind of work. I am an intellectual." Schweitzer, with five earned doctorates replied, "I used to be an intellectual, but I couldn't live up to it."

When we are Christians, we don't have anything to live up to, no pretenses to maintain, no privileges to guard. We can't be too low in the eyes of the world. We can't be losers enough. Paradoxically, there is wonderful peace and freedom in that.

The Gospel – the good news of our faith – is all about grace – the grace of God. No matter how perfect you think you are and no matter how imperfect you know you are, we all need the grace of God. Salvation comes by grace alone. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do to earn the grace of God. It's gift, all gift.

I love the story told by Father George Regas about a woman in a small town in Tennessee, who had an adulterous affair with a very public person. Both marriages ended, and she was expelled from her Methodist church, causing a major scandal in the small town. Such matters were neither forgotten nor forgiven.

This woman was living with the shame of being kicked out of her own church. At first, she was arrogant and went her way. But the hostility, the

silence, the sneers, the snubs got to her, and she retreated for several years. She was humiliated, defeated, and depressed.

Then one day she came to Father Regas. She said to him, “I have sinned, and I am not worthy of God, but I desperately need God. I’ll do anything to gain back God’s love. Help me. Help me, please. I’m so empty, so lonely.”

Father Regas counseled this woman for six months. He told her there was nothing she could do to gain God’s love. She could do nothing to become worthy of God’s acceptance. She only needed to accept God’s gift as she was. She fought it fiercely. Her sin was horrible. She had ruined so much what was good and beautiful. Now, she must atone and work to become worthy of God’s love once more.

No, said Father Regas, just confess your sins and accept God’s mercy, God’s gracious offer of love. She did. Then her life began to change. For the first time in five hard, bruising years she came to church and received the bread and wine of Holy Communion – those precious tokens of God’s redeeming love.¹

Do you see what the good news of the Gospel is all about? It’s not about rules, regulations, dogmas, and doctrines, as important as these may be. The good news is the theological certainty that God loves you as you are and not as you should be. God loves you beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity. God loves you in the morning sun and the evening rain. God loves you without caution, regret, boundary, limit, or breaking point. Yes, God loves you... God really loves you, just as you are.

The 18th century Church of England priest Augustus Montague Toplady knew the power of grace. Arrogant, proud, but struggling to find his way in life, Toplady was converted to Christianity at the age of sixteen by a mission sermon preached in an Irish barn by an itinerant preacher who was barely literate himself. Toplady got ordained priest in the Church of England and eventually became Rector of a church in Devon. His health was never good, and he struggled mightily with his own sense of sinfulness.

One day in 1763, Toplady was caught in a bitter rainstorm, and found him crying out to God, “Lord, have mercy.” He took shelter in a rocky gorge. There, protected from the rain beating down on the rocks, he found a playing card lying at his feet and wrote these verses:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Should my tears flow forever,
Should my zeal no languor know,
All for sin could not atone:
Thou must save, and thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling.

Rock of Ages articulates what is at the heart of our Christian faith: We don't merit God's mercy. We don't earn God's favor. Only when we stand before the cross of Christ guilty and bankrupt is all the treasure of God's mercy poured upon us – just as we are. Christ's love is for free, and it's for sinners. We don't need to be good, religious, or wise. We need only trust our saving Lord, take him at his word, and let him be the pardoning God he wants to be.

Have you ever heard about the priest who dreamed that he died and was trying to get to heaven? When he approached the pearly gates, St. Peter told him he needed 100 points to get in. Proudly the priest said, "Well, I was a priest for 53 years." "That's fine," said Peter. "That's worth one point."

"One point? Is that all?" cried the priest. "Just one point for 53 years of service?"

"Yes, that's correct," answered Peter.

"Well, I visited the homebound."

"One point."

"I was a youth group leader for hundreds of young people."

"One point."

“I worked tirelessly for peace and justice and supported the hungry and homeless.”

“One more point. That makes four points. You need 96 more.”

“Oh, no,” said the priest, in panic. “I feel so helpless, inadequate. Except for the grace of God, I don’t have a chance!”

St. Peter smiled and said, “Grace of God – 96 points! Come on in!”

That’s amazing grace, which will always be our song of praise. We will never know why God loves us so much, but God does love us and will never stop loving us – never.

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Proper 25, C

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1. George Regas, “Bootstraps and Grace” – a sermon delivered at All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California, October 23, 1994.
2. Augustus Toplady, “Rock of Ages,” *The Hymnal 1982* (The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985).