

Being Formed in Humility

Luke 18:9-14 October 26, 2025 Pentecost 20

Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia

Following Jesus is a dangerous thing to do. That is true, at least, when we pattern our lives after what Jesus actually said and actually did. You know what happens, don't you, when you submit to that formation? You become increasingly odd – when measured against what the surrounding culture prizes.

The great Catholic short story writer, Flannery O'Connor, is reported to have said, "You shall know the truth – and the truth shall make you odd."¹

I mean, look at how odd Jesus wants us to be, according to the short, but explosive story we read this morning, in the gospel of Luke.

[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "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."

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." We are encouraged, by this passage, to be formed by the Spirit in humility.

But isn't this odd? Isn't this entirely counter to our culture of self-promotion? Don't you need to present your accomplishments in the best possible way, to be positioned for the next opportunity that will come along? (I remember the years when I thought that. I had a file on my computer labeled "Resume," so I could easily keep it up to date with a new sentence about a new honor or accomplishment, and then I'd be able to send that resume out at any time with a click of the mouse.)

¹ This quote is widely attributed to Flannery O'Connor. The difficulty is that no one can find where she wrote or said it!

All of us in this room have been formed in what David Brooks calls a “hypercompetitive system built upon merit [which] is going to encourage people to think a lot about themselves and the cultivation of their own skills.”²

Brooks writes, “The meritocratic system wants you to be big about yourself – to puff yourself, to be completely sure of yourself, to believe that you deserve a lot and to get what you think you deserve (so long as it is good). The meritocracy wants you to assert and advertise yourself. It wants you to display and exaggerate your achievements. The achievement machine rewards you if you can demonstrate superiority – if with a thousand little gestures, conversational types, and style of dress you can demonstrate that you are a bit smarter, hipper, more accomplished, sophisticated, famous, plugged in, and fashion-forward than the people around you. It encourages narrowing. It encourages you to become a shrewd animal.”³

Is there an alternative to this? How else are you going to get into med school, or law school, or into the corner office, or to become volunteer of the year? Isn’t it all up to you, and what you can accomplish?

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The Pharisee, in this morning’s story from Luke, has been formed by the religious achievement machine of his culture to think that it’s all up to him, and that he needs to be “big about himself” because he needs to prove himself with God! **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.’** (Let me very quickly say that there is nothing wrong with giving a tenth of your income! It is pledging season, after all, here at Bruton Parish!)

The issue in all of this is not our accomplishments. Accomplishments are good! The key to this morning’s gospel story is in the editor’s very first words: Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”

How often does this describe you? It certainly describes me, often, when I allow myself to be formed by the achievement machine of our culture. How often I burden myself by thinking it’s all up to me. How often do I suffer because I think that if things aren’t going well it’s because I’m not working hard enough! Am I alone in this? Or can you, too, drive yourself crazy by focusing on what you *should* have done better?

But, here’s the thing: when you are trusting in yourself, when it’s all up to you, can you *ever* be good enough? Isn’t it true, instead, that you can *always* find something to criticize about your performance? That you always fall short of perfection?

Of course that’s true! But that’s what it means to trust in yourself (to use this phrase from the gospel story).

² David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), page 252.

³ Ibid., page 253.

Is there any good news in living this way? In my experience, it's always and entirely bad news!

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Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." Who trusted in themselves that they could earn that right relationship with God by their own merits. As if they could be accomplished enough in following religious rules so strictly that they could please God by their own works...

...when, instead, it all depends on God's grace.

Our righteousness only comes through grace. Indeed, our righteousness is what God *has* accomplished for us – on the cross.

It is simply a matter of the First Commandment. Since God is God, you and I are not. In fact, here's the good news; here is the gospel: Since God is God, you and I don't have to try to be! It is not up to us! God is God!

Receiving the faith to actually believe this frees us to be transformed by God the Holy Spirit, to be formed by the Spirit in a healthy humility, like the tax collector in the parable Jesus tells. His prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" is simply a recognition of who he is. It's who you and I are. It's not up to us! What joy there is in this!

The danger in following Jesus is that it makes us increasingly odd – living as we are in a culture that encourages us to trust in ourselves, to be big about ourselves, to promote ourselves, to make it all about us, and our achievements, and our resumes, even regarding others with contempt because they don't measure up to us. But is there any good news in living that way?

Here is the good news, the gospel: **"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."**

Here is the entirely counter-cultural good news of the gospel: As the Spirit transforms us to know that it is not up to us, we are freed to simply respond to God's grace, using the gifts that God has given us, to do the work God gives us to do, quietly, competently, with healthy humility.

Isn't this a joyous way to live?

In the name of God, who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastor Andy Ballentine