

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." ¹³But 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!" ¹⁴I 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.'

It seems to be so easy!

We are sympathetic with the tax collector. We definitely like him. He is so humble-minded when he talks to God. He knows that he is a sinner. He not only knows it; he also confesses being a sinner.

We distance ourselves from the Pharisee, who looks so self-righteous in the temple, arrogant, displeasing, he thinks he is a "special someone". We prefer to hear: Aren't we all sinners? As protestants have always proclaimed.

At the end of the parable, Jesus confirms: **This man went down to his home justified rather than the other**... In just a few words, everything is right.

If it was that easy, I could say "Amen" now. A short sermon. Nothing to add. However, it is not that easy. Of course not. The casting is not as simple as it looks when we read or hear the parable.

Some prayers today sound like this one: "Thank you, Lord that I am not like this Pharisee. I do not fast; I do not give ten percent from my income. I do not go regularly to church; and of course, I do cheat some people to increase my income. I am so grateful that you love the tax-collector more than the Pharisee, and therefore you will justify me, too."

Or the other way round:

"Thank you, Lord that your grace helped me not to be as self-righteous as this Pharisee and all the other holier-than-thou people. Thank you, Lord, for giving me clearness and deeper insight, that I remain a poor sinner despite my entire ministry for my church. I know how worthless I am in your eyes and that I do deserve nothing, but your judgement. Thank you, Lord, for your grace, which helps me be genuinely human. With your help, Lord, I am

able to not look down on the Pharisee. By your grace, I am able to accept him as someone whom you love despite his self-righteousness, as you love me as someone who knows about his sins and about your grace!”

Unbearable! Isn't it?

Who goes down to his home justified and who not?

If there were more Pharisees in Peace Church, our church would grow much better! It would be enough if everyone in here would donate 5% of his or her regular income. There would not be any need to talk about money. Not to talk about the 10%, the Pharisee regularly donates.

If everyone who belongs to Peace Church would join worship as regular as the Pharisees did, this church would be crowded Sunday by Sunday. If all of us would fast twice a week as the Pharisees did, we not only would live much more healthily. It would shape our lives; we would be well sorted and probably less hectic.

The Pharisee thanks God for a successful life. He knows that everything could have been very different. He is able to watch himself. He doesn't take things for granted. Not his position nor his skills or his path of life.

Was it my merit that I was born in Germany and not in Somalia, for example? Everything could have been very different. My path of life, my job, my marriage, my health. Thanking God for my life has nothing to do with pride or self-righteousness.

If more people didn't take their life for granted, more people would pray and thank God.

However, I would not be happy having more Pharisees like this one in Peace Church. “He was standing by himself,” says the Bible. And that's how he prays as well. **I thank you that I am not like other people... ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”**

I, I, I,...

He presents his virtuous life. He does it by telling, what he is doing. In addition, he does it by telling who he is not. Especially not someone like this ugly tax collector. An inclined and comparative view. The death of love.

But, what is he? Who is he?

Is he only what he is carrying out?

Who are we?

If we had to tell, who we are, could we tell more than what we have been carrying out or what we have been able to buy or how many hours, weeks or years we had been able to work?

Are we not more than all of these lists full of a somehow strange pride?

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them, Lord?” (Psalm 8)

If there were more tax collectors in Peace Church, our church would grow much better! Slowly and hesitant the tax collector climbs up to the temple. He wants to meet God. He does not know what to say and how to behave. It is a long time ago that he had been here. He is not used to the rules and the liturgy anymore. There are some dark memories from his childhood, a foreign home and an alien form of life.

Therefore, he keeps standing far off, with a depressed look, listening to the choir, the bright voices.

The music widens his heart. Then comes the psalm. He can't remember which one it was. But the words seem to come out of his soul: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love... Create in me a clean heart, O God...” (Psalm 51)

In the temple, the house of God, he loses what had strained and loaded every single of his steps. No accusingly looks, no insults and no criticisms. This is another reality.

He listens to words that do not color life but still keep the doors open for him. He joins in praying and his heart becomes wide.

He does not rely on his own life but on the promise, that God will heal him.

It only takes him one sentence to pray: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

If there were more tax collectors in Peace Church, our church would grow much better!

More people among us, who are not shy of presenting themselves to God as they are. More people among us who are able to sort out their lives, who are aware of their limits, who are able to accept their failings and who want to be healed by God.

If not here at Peace Church, where else?

In fairness, I have to add: It completely gets on my nerves when people, Christians (!), don't know any other sentence or truth about their own life than: “I am such a poor and miserable sinner.”

As if this was the whole truth about my life! As if this was the most important sentence about our lives!

What sort of church will grow with people who always make themselves look small, who always play themselves down?

Which hope will grow out of a church filled with bent people?

How can we learn to not only realize our limits, but to practice a whole view on our life?

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them, Lord?” (Psalm 8)

Both, Pharisee and Tax Collector join the service in the temple. The service accommodates both of them. This is something very special and we cannot take it for granted. It is a beautiful part of the church, that we can meet God and come back as different people with a different view on our lives. As long as we celebrate in community, we do not have to compare and no one compares us. We are no longer urged to ensure the value of our life.

We don't have to prove anything in church. We even don't have to promise to become better people.

We are welcome.

Pharisees and Tax Collectors, believers and seekers, enthusiasts and doubters. There is an invitation at the door, which says: “Come in and thank God for your happy life. Or: Come in or stand far off and ask God to heal what is broken in your life and what you never could heal without him.”

Sometimes one sentence is enough.

Both, Pharisee and Tax Collector join the service in the temple.

Let me tell you about a novel, “Night Train to Lisbon”. Pascal Mercier, the writer, tells us in this novel about Gregorius, a man who one day leaves his everyday life to get to know the rest of his life, he hadn't lived by then. He is in search of himself.

He wants to know if there was more than routine. He wants to know if his life might be a whole one, which he had not discovered by then. And he wants to know if there was a God who could heal his life.

Gregorius has difficulties to believe. But sometimes he stood in front of the door of a cathedral and he was able to express his feelings:

“I would not like to live in a world without cathedrals. I need their beauty and grandeur. I need them against the vulgarity of the world. I want to look up at the illuminated church windows and let myself be blinded by the unearthly colors. I need their luster. I need it against the dirty colors of the uniforms. I want to let myself be wrapped in the austere coolness of the churches.

I need their imperious silence. I need it against the witless bellowing of the barracks yard and the witty chatter of the yes-men. I want to hear the rustling of the organ, this deluge of ethereal tones. I need it against the shrill farce of marches. I love praying people. I need the sight of them. I need it against the malicious poison of the superficial and the thoughtless. I want to read the powerful words of the Bible. I need the unreal force of their poetry. I need it against the dilapidation of the language and the dictatorship of the slogans. A world without these things would be a world I would not like to live in.” (P. Mercier, *Night Train to Lisbon*, 168)

Both, Pharisee and Tax Collector join the service in the temple. There they find more and something bigger than themselves without the pressing of comparing.

Let us in a last part approach the message of justification and let us think about a small talk.

It can be exhausting if you do **not** want to “make” your life. It can be exhausting if you try to live with limitations and still accept your life and yourself as person.

Let me tell you a situation which has not happened, but which is true anyway. It is about electing a Superintendent in the Methodist Church in Germany, but it also could be in any other company.

The candidates introduce themselves to the delegates of the Annual Conference. They talk about their career and their several jobs in the church; they talk about their family: 16 years of marriage, still happy, of course. Two adult children who live somewhere else, so the pastor is free for the job and the church. His wife does the housework, which is not said, but presupposed. All of the candidates present a seemingly successful life.

What I really would love to experience, at least once:

A candidate takes the microphone saying: My name is Hans Mayer. I was married for 17 years, but now we are divorced. My older daughter does not talk to me anymore; she does not like my new girlfriend.

I stopped working 60 hours per week, when we got divorced. I care for my health and my private needs. I enjoy free days. I don't have to prove anything to anyone. I know who I am and what I am able to do. I know about my limits. That's what I have to offer.

I am not sure if he could win the election.

We talk and preach a lot about justification. That we are loved and accepted, that we are valued beyond our activities. But most of the time we live as if this was a foreign language which we don't understand.

Maybe the Pharisee and the Tax Collector could help us.

They have to learn from each other and we have to learn from both of them.

If we listen precisely enough, we might hear the following:

It is good to praise God for all that was successful in our lives, for gifts and talents, for happiness, for the gift of overabundance.

It is good to take nothing for granted. It is good to know how near a crash can be, how vulnerable we are, how exposed and needy.

Especially in need of God.

It is good to know that we are limited people, sinners, no doubt.

It is good to know that this is not the only and most important truth about our life.

Much more important is: We shall live heads held up high; precious and promising human beings. We are able to confess: I praise you, for I am wonderfully made by your love. And we can continue a next sentence: **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"**

Both, Pharisee and Tax Collector join the service in the temple.

They belong together, not only in this parable. If they don't stand far off each other but celebrate together, sing and pray, hand in hand as brothers and sisters. If we leave the comparing look behind, we can hear God's declaration of love:

Do not be afraid. I am with you. I will never abandon you. Stand up, take your mat and walk. Your sins are forgiven. Be pleased about your life.

Amen