

The Pharisee and Tax Collector
The Rev. Dave Duggins, Luke 18:9-14
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Today, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we see the polar opposites of prayer—how two men went up to the temple to pray—the brash and boastful Pharisee, convinced of his righteousness and the humble tax collector who knew that he missed the mark and that God saw the content of his soul . There was no question that both men were guilty of sin—as are we all. We are all guilty of sin by what we have done and what we have left undone—sins of commission and sins of omission.

In the original Hebrew and Greek languages the bible talks about the doctrine of sin by using at least twenty different words to describe disobedience to God. The most frequently used word was *hamartia*. It was frequently used because it is the most comprehensive term for explaining sin. *Hamartia* is an archery term that means “missing the mark”—not being able to hit the target.

As you know, one of my favorite writers is William Shakespeare. He wrote about missing the mark in “as you like it” where the character, Duke Senior says”

*“true is it that we have seen better days,
And have with holy bell been knoll'd to church,
And sat at good men's feasts, and wip'd our eyes
Of drops that sacred pity hath engender'ed;”*

Duke Senior’s words remind me of the way Jesus talks about the two men who went to pray at the temple. Notice if you will, how they were described—just two men: neither of them spoken of as being particularly righteous or sinful. In the eyes of God they both came to the temple on a level field. Both men were sinners, both men prayed, but only one man went back to his home forgiven.

Over two thousand years ago, in a simpler age, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector was told and received. But, today, we live in a society overwhelmed with the ambiguity of choices; the Bible speaks eloquently about sin. But in the post-modern rise of secular culture sin is a more abstract concept.

USA Today had a story about Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian church in Manhattan. He’s a modern-day variation of the circuit-riding preacher, who dashes across central park to three different leased locations to serve five thousand worshipers at five services on Sundays.

When Keller, author of *The Reason For God: Belief In An Age Of Skepticism*, speaks about "sin" to his audiences, which are seventy percent single and younger than 40 he says, "i use it with lots and lots of explanation, because the word is essentially obsolete.

They do get the idea of branding, of taking a word or term and filling it with your own content, so i have to rebrand the word 'sin,' " Keller says.

Brothers and sisters in christ; the world we grew up in is in direct conflict with the world our children and grandchildren navigate with such ease. How can a moral person make wise choices? In the face of all these distractions how can we ever choose the right path?

One way to sift through all this stuff may be to just stop...be still...and through quiet reflection, theological reflection, we can discern how our faith traditions and the world around us forms a workable, sound concept of prayer and forgiveness.

Theological reflection is a broad concept that frightens a lot of people. But theological reflection is something we do periodically down the hall in Sunday School and everyone seems to enjoy it.

Abigail Johnson writes for the Alban Institute. She says *"Theological reflection is simply wondering about God's activity in our lives. Where is God present? We all reflect, wonder, analyze, think, assess, and discuss with friends as ways of trying to understand our life. Theological reflection simply refocuses all that thinking to encourage a stronger sense of relationship with God, asking, "where does God fit into the picture?"*

So, I ask you...where do you think God fits into the modern experience of prayer and forgiveness talked about in today's gospel?

A look at our common Christian traditions tells us that today's parable wasn't the first time Jesus talked about prayer and forgiveness.

In Matthew Jesus said: *"when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full.*

Mark recorded that Jesus said: *"and when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your father in heaven may forgive you your sins"*

In the Lord 's Prayer we ask *"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil."*

Matthew says that Jesus was asked a question about forgiveness. *"Then Peter came to him and said, 'Lord how often shall my brother sin against me, and i forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'"*

I calculated the total of seventy times seven and it comes to 490. Now, I've been keeping score and i know some folks who are up to about 390 and another one is all the way up to 423. Now, for my own sake, i surely hope my wife hasn't been using the same score card on me.

So there you have it. Our Christian tradition is fairly black and white on prayer and forgiveness.

Our popular culture however, introduces shades of gray into the picture. And sometimes it becomes so confusing that we're left wondering who's the bad guy and who's the good guy?

Anglican apologist C.S. Lewis who wrote the Narnia series and Mere Christianity says *"everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea; until he has something to forgive."*

Here's a story by way of illustration. A woman bought a parrot for a pet but all the parrot did was treat her badly. It constantly insulted her *...you're ugly! I can't stand you!"* And every time she tried to pick it up, it would peck at her arm. One day she got fed up with all the abuse and as the parrot was insulting her she picked it up, opened the freezer door, threw him inside and closed the door. The parrot looked around inside the freezer, for about 5 seconds and then it was suddenly quiet. The woman thought, "Oh no, I killed it!" she opened the door and the parrot just looked at her. She picked it up and the parrot said: *"i'm very sorry. I apologize for my bad behavior and promise you there will be no more abuse. From now on, i will be a respectful, obedient parrot."* "Well Ok" she said. "Apology, accepted I forgive you."

Then the parrot looked at the freezer and he said, "Tell me something? Just what did the chicken do?"

Life experience shows that when the scoundrels we encounter in popular culture are given time to fulfill their true purpose those shades of gray tend resolve themselves and the question of where is God in all this is resolved.

Take Rick Blane for instance. Rick was the hard-pressed expatriate nightclub owner in the movie Casablanca who gives up his last chance for freedom to his ex-girlfriend.

Closer to the shades of gray we see in real life is the story of Oskar Schindler.

We know him from the book Schindler's Ark written by Thomas Keneally that gave birth to the popular movie "Shindler's List." Schindler was described as a cynical, greedy exploiter of slave workers, a black-marketeer, and gambler. A member of the Nazi Party always on the lookout for profit, an alcoholic playboy and womanizer.

Schindler comes to Krakow, Poland seeking his fortune during world war two. With the help of his quietly courageous clerk Itzhak Stern he ends up outwitting the Nazi SS to protect his Jewish employees.

One day, Schindler and stern find themselves talking about the chances of hitler's success and about his religion. Schindler remarks that it must be difficult for priests during this time to explain the biblical verse about God caring about the death of even a single sparrow.

Stern says that the spirit of the verse could be summed up in the talmudic thought that says he who saves the life of one man saves the entire world. Thomas Keneally wrote that Stern believed this was the moment a seed was planted in Schindler's mind.

Talk about shades of gray--Oskar Schindler the opportunistic war profiteer earned millions through the exploitation of slave workers but he spent every last cent and risked his life to save twelve hundred jews from Hitler's death camps.

Today there are more than seven thousand descents of Schindler's Jews living in America, Europe And Israel.

When Oskar Schindler died in 1974 his extraordinary story might have died with him because he never spoke about it. His story survived through the gratitude of the *Schindlerjuden* he saved.

And so, i have two questions for you. First, what do you think God saw in the content of his soul when oskar schindler prayed? Indeed what does God see in our souls when we pray. And, secondly, does this short exercise in theological reflection using our christian tradition and popular culture references help us find God in all this?

Hopefully all this reflection leads us to discernment, greater understanding and help us pray like the tax collector and not the Pharisee

Maybe it also helps us see more clearly the truth in Shakespeare's observation:

*"True is it that we have seen better days,
And have with holy bell been knoll'd to church,
And sat at good men's feasts, and wip'd our eyes
Of drops that sacred pity hath engender'ed
"*

Or as the tax collector more eloquently prayed while standing in a far corner of the temple ashamed to even look toward to heaven: *"God, be merciful to me a sinner."* Amen.