

## Message: "Paradoxical Bragging Rights"

### Scripture Lesson: Luke 18:9-14

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

Boy, I don't know about you, but I thank God I'm not like that pharisee!

Wait a minute - just by saying that, haven't I become just like that pharisee?

This is a bit confusing, isn't it? When one is humble, to state that one is humble makes one not humble; or maybe we can put it this way: to claim that one is humble and provide proof to that effect nulls the claim; or maybe this makes more sense: to lift up one's righteousness is an act of pride that negates the essential element of lowliness to righteousness.....or maybe simplest is best: to brag about one's humility means you're a jerk? (I can't believe I just said "jerk"!)

Jesus tells a parable: a very religious figure, a pharisee, brags about his righteousness. He has some good points, that he fasts and tithes, that he doesn't steal or harm or commit adultery or collect corrupt taxes. These are ideals of faith, things we should all work towards; we could call them evidence of a faithful life. He gives them voice in the temple, praying his gratitude that he is not like others, and that he does what faith ought to do. He seems to be quite pleased with himself.

But he does two things wrong -- he brags and he compares.

But then, in the background of this scene, hiding out in the shadows of the temple, a lowly figure appears, head bowed in shame, beating his chest in desperate plea for mercy, a blunt prayer void of eloquence or depth; it's all right there, spoken with a broken voice to mirror his broken heart, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

But he does two things right - he humbles himself and opens his heart to God.

Only one of these two figures left the temple justified - and we know which one. Jesus here is doing what Jesus does best - teasing our minds through parable in order to carry our thinking beyond the boundaries of our normal considerations. He's illustrating what wisdom understands, that humility is an essential but elusive trait we are to value and nurture; in contrast, self-righteousness is a vice we are to identify and diffuse in ourselves and others. God can only be related to in humility; God is most easily replaced by ego.

Righteousness that is advertised becomes self-righteousness; the humble are justified; the proud will be become lowly. These are what can be thought of as higher-level counter-intuitive truths; higher level in that they reflect essential understandings foundational to authentic faith; counter-intuitive in that they are not as obvious as many foundational truths. Counter-intuitive truths take work to understand; they need experience to translate their paradoxical nature; yet, they are more common than we realize; for instance, here are some lower-level counter-intuitive truths:

#### Counter-intuitive truths (Things I've Learned):

The last oreo in a package never tastes as good as the first.

No matter how prepared you are, you are never completely ready for the fall's first snow.

Mentioning an opportunity in church is equivalent to volunteering to lead efforts working toward that opportunity.

Regarding those who say "I promise," place no bets.

A computer's schedule for updating is perfectly synchronized to automatically occur during your most important online presentation.

When someone says "watch this," close your eyes.

There's an inverse relationship between how good a food tastes and how healthy it is for you.

These are things that you would think would be opposite, but life experiences tell us they are often true; the paradox reveals the assumptions we have about life and how it should unfold; when these assumptions fail, we are shocked into a deeper reality, a more true worldview. It is when assumptions fail that truth can take its proper place in life.

The same thing is true regarding higher level counter-intuitive truths. These are the truths that we have a hard time coming up with on our own ones which God reveals to us in faith. This is what is often meant by the reverse wisdom elements that Jesus was always trying to get across - things we need to know for life that are easily missed by the unaware. See if these make sense:

Higher-level counter-intuitive truths (Things Jesus teaches or that humanity )

Those who say they are humble, aren't.

To those who say "trust me," don't.

Regarding those who say "I know I'm right," retain your doubt.

To those who claim to have all the answers, retain your questions.

Those who say "I know just how you feel," don't.

When told "this will be easy," prepare for difficulty.

The loudest voice in the room is sometimes the least authentic.

Those who question, learn.

Those who think, grow.

Those who love, live.

Those who hate, exist.

Those who are quiet in speech are often grand in service.

To discover who is humble, watch more than listen.

Being loving is a thousand times more important than being right.

Being full of self empties one of God; being full of God fills self with life.

There are those who are eager to advertise their righteousness, to lift up their virtue, or to parade their values in order to affect others. Very often, they are doing so in the effort to win political office, to distract from rising scandal, or to disempower others deemed inferior. But there are many more who are eager to live their righteousness, silent in their report. It may seem counter-intuitive to avoid pride and seek selflessness, but the lives that do so are much more capable of living beyond the confines of human limitation. These are the people who understand that a lived faith is life, and needs no advertisement.

Those who are into self-promotion must feed themselves constantly to feel full; but those who are desperate for God find themselves constantly filled.