

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GLASS HOUSES OUGHT NOT
TO THROW STONES”
LUKE 18:9-14
October 24, 2010
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

There is an old wise saying: **“People who live in glass houses ought not to throw stones.”** This is a vivid reminder that none of us is perfect. The noblest hero and the lowest scoundrel are in need of the mercy of God. We never outgrow our need for heartfelt repentance and divine forgiveness.

Jesus told a story that challenges some of the basic assumptions of our religion. It takes our traditional values and stands them on their head. It turns a role model into a villain, and a villain into a role model. When we first meet these two men, they are on their way to the temple. From a distance, they look very much alike. They are both Jews, and both observing the appointed hour of prayer. But there the similarities end. Look beneath the surface, and you find two quite different men.

Jesus introduced them as a Pharisee and a tax collector. In modern parlance, we might call them a good guy and a bad guy. One wore a white hat, and the other a black hat. And anyone with an ounce of judgment knows which is which. The Pharisee was a respectable citizen of the first order. His resumes read like a pedigree. He could qualify for membership in any civic club in town. He was loaded with commendable qualities. On the negative side, he avoided all of the sordid sins. He did not commit adultery. He was not a petty thief. He did not defraud those who did business with him. That may not qualify the man for sainthood. But it's a good start on good character. Usually, we are happy with the man who keeps his nose clean, and doesn't corrupt the public morals.

On the positive side, the Pharisee gets more good marks. He fasted twice a week. The law required only once. He doubled that. What is more (And it is enough to make a pastor's heart leap for joy), he gave one-tenth of his income to

the Lord. Frankly, I would welcome this man into parish membership today, and pray that his tribe might increase. He was the kind of person that makes the church go. He keeps the budget afloat. He does his part to keep the building program solvent. We should not allow our stereotypes about Pharisees to blind us to one reality: This was a good man. No question about it.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was a bit of a scoundrel. His singular commitment was making money. And he had few scruples about how. He would do it honestly if possible, but dishonestly if necessary. The main thing was to make money. And some people were victims of his greed. I have little doubt that tongues started wagging the minute he walked in. **“Can you believe the nerve of that guy? Last week he cheated me out of a thousand dollars. This week he shows up in the temple. The gall of some people is unbelievable.”** The tax collector was a crook. But Jesus said he was the one who went home, justified in the eyes of God. What are we to do with this story?

I. It tells me, first of all, not to be too impressed with my virtues.

Sure, I’m one of the good guys. And no doubt, you are too. That may sound a little snobbish. But I think we really are. It could be argued in a court of law that we qualify for membership in the good guy’s club. However, the method by which we reached that conclusion may need a little scrutiny. For example, one of our qualifications is sexual purity or, at least, decency. We have been reading and hearing a lot in the news lately about adultery. All of it is tragic. I am glad that you and I have not become a part of these scandalous stories. But, be careful, my friends, lest we become too impressed with our virtues. Sexual decency is sensible and commendable. But it does not qualify one for sainthood.

Another of our virtues is honesty in financial dealings. I pay my bills. And I would venture a guess that you do too. We do not engage in petty theft. Your neighbor could give you a key to his house. And you would never use it to steal one thing. We do not play con games. It would never occur to us to sell worthless stock certificates to unsuspecting customers. We would rather die than to do that! All of this is right and good. Keep it up, my friends. You will sleep better at night. The stability of our economic system depends upon simple and voluntary honesty. And you are a part of that. But do not be too impressed with it. This is something that all decent people do.

II. The second thing this story tells us is not to be too critical of other people’s faults.

The tax collector was a convenient fall guy for the Pharisee. Everyone knew the virtue of one and the shame of the other. The Pharisee said: ***“God, I give you thanks that I am not like this tax collector.”*** Well, credit him with the truth. He was probably a much better man than the tax collector. In that society, Pharisees were usually decent people. And the tax collectors were usually thieving scoundrels. But I am inclined to say’ **“So what?”** Do you think he needed to inform God of that? Maybe he thought God was grading on the curve. And he wanted to be sure that he got all of the credit coming to him.

Does it really matter that in some areas I may do a little better than you? And does it matter that in other areas you may do better than I? No, I don’t think that matters one whit. God doesn’t compare you to me or me to you. That is what we do.

Over ten years ago, **Mark McGwire** and **Sammy Sosa** both hit more home runs in baseball than any other player in history. It was fun to watch. And we gave them both high marks. But God doesn’t grade that way. He may have given his highest mark to the bat boy. Jesus, you may recall, was always pinning blue ribbons on strange people. He gave his greatest faith award to a Roman army officer. **(Matthew 8:10)** He gave his greatest gift award to an impoverished widow. **(Mark 12)** He gave his top love award to a common prostitute. **(Luke 7:47)** Our Lord is full of surprises.

It really doesn’t matter that I do better than you, or that you do better than I. The bottom line about both of us is that we are sinners in need of mercy. I need mercy from you. You need mercy from me. And we both need mercy from God. The good news is that we both have it, not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of grace. Considering that, why don’t you and I learn to be merciful to one another?

Some people speak as if hypocrites were confined to religion, but they are everywhere. People pretending to wealth when they are deep in debt! People spouting knowledge of which they are ignorant. People claiming athletic feats of which they are incapable. People advocating opinions that they do not hold! We are all companions in hypocrisy of one sort or another.

When we do a good deed, we are like the Pharisee wanting the applause of God and men. But when we are honest with ourselves, we know that the tax collector’s prayer is the better way to pray. And I can prayerfully say, honestly that I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.