

October 23, 2016 The Tax Collector and the Pharisee Homily: In the literature of Hasidic Jews there is a illuminating story about a learned and pious Jew, the Rabbi of Apt, who was due to arrive in another village for a much anticipated visit. Two men of the village competed for the honor of giving the great man lodgings. In both households all the rules of Jewish piety were scrupulously observed. No one in the village could accuse the first man of bad behavior. He could boast of his spotless purity. The second man had many love affairs and other sinful doings. He considered himself lost, a failure. He knew that he was weak and thought little of himself. When the rabbi arrived, he selected the house with the bad reputation. He explained why. "Concerning the vain and conceited, God says, 'He and I cannot live together in this world. And if God Himself, Blessed be He, cannot share a room with the proud, then How could I.'" He added, "God dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness, and if God takes lodgings there, why can't I".

The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno once wrote that the temple in Jerusalem is the place where people go to weep. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, only one wept, the tax collector. "He stands afar off" (Lk. 18:12). Undoubtedly, he feared his fellow worshippers might shun him. His isolation must have been particularly painful. In his heart, he felt unworthy to come before God, but, as we learn from the first reading, "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds" (Sir. 35:15).

The Pharisee, on the other hand, goes to the temple to boast of his righteousness. He intentionally separates himself from the sinful tax collector. His derisive words about the tax collector are worth noting. "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity...greedy, dishonest, adulterous... or even like this tax collector" (Lk. 18:11) As one Jewish scholar contends, "The problem with his prayer is not in his personal religiosity; it is in his negatively judging someone else". She continues: The Evangelist Luke Shows that negatively judging others is not a trait that signals Jewish values; it is, rather, a human trait and one to which the disciples of Jesus may fall prey".

Many years ago the renowned preacher, Bishop Fulton Sheen gave a spiritual retreat at a maximum security prison. In the opening conference he told the inmates that there was only one difference between him and them. And the difference? "You got caught", he exclaimed. He made the point that all are sinners and in need of God's mercy. No one can or should boast of his sanctity before God. "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk.18:14)

Let us ask ourselves: Do we compare ourselves to other people? Do we look for reasons to set ourselves above other people? Do we look for reasons to regard ourselves as more virtuous than others?

Have we "convinced ourselves of our own righteousness and despised everyone else"? (Lk.18:9)

Amen!