

Summer Blockbusters

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Luke 18:9-14

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: **10** “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ **13** “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ **14** “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

--Luke 18:9-14, *New International Version*

Phil was a good guy. Everybody liked Phil.

He came from a solid Christian family. He grew up in church. When he was 12 years old, he heard the preacher talk about asking Jesus into your heart. And he knew it was time. And he went down to the altar ... and from that day forward, Phil lived as a Christian.

Phil was president of his youth group. He was a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. And after school, every day, Phil's family would sit down to dinner, and his mother would always say, “So Phil, how was your day?” And he would talk about the goals he scored at practice, or how a teacher said he was doing a good job, or how he asked a girl out and she said yes.

Phil went to college, and he made the Deans' List every semester. Then he got a great job with a corner office. And then he married his college sweetheart, and they moved into a nice house, had two kids, got a dog, and a minivan.

Phil went to church every Sunday. During the week he led a small group Bible study. Every night he did devotions with his family.

Phil was a good guy. Everybody liked Phil.

Well, one day it was a beautiful sunny day, and Phil decided to walk to lunch. And as he was walking down the street, he walked past this beautiful, stately old church. And Phil thought, “I've got some extra time—I'm going to pop in here and pray.”

Phil climbed the steps and pushed open the heavy wooden door. He entered the sanctuary. The sun was shining through the big stained glass windows, casting

multi-colored light all over the stone and the wood. It was quiet, beautiful, and peaceful. You could just feel the presence of God.

Phil walked down the aisle and he sat down on the front row. He looked up at the big cross hanging on the wall. And he prayed, "God, thank you. My life is really good. I've worked hard, it's paid off, and here I am. I just want to say thanks."

And about that time, Phil heard the big heavy door of church open. He turned around and looked, and he saw a man rush through the door and sit down on the last pew. Phil knew who the guy was. He'd seen him around town. He was a drug dealer!

And Phil thought, *What's that guy doing here? Why would he come into a church?*

And then Phil had another thought: *Maybe God brought that fellow in here to say something to me.*

Phil pondered this. And then a thought struck him. Yes, he thought, that's it: *God's trying to tell me that he's proud of me because I'm not like that guy!*

And Phil got up and walked out of the church feeling really good about himself!

And somewhere up in heaven, God's heart was broken. Because at that moment, Phil was as far away from God as he had ever been.

Tad was a bad guy. Most people didn't like Tad.

Tad grew up in the projects with three younger brothers and his baby sister. His single mother worked two jobs to support them. And Tad never helped out. He never applied himself in school. As soon as he could, he dropped out. And not long after that, he left home.

Tad was a bad guy. Most people didn't like Tad.

From the time he was a little kid, Tad only had one ambition. He wanted to be like the guys he saw in the projects who drove great big cars, and wore expensive leather jackets, and gold chains around their necks, and brand new \$200 sneakers. He would see those guys pull up and talk to somebody. He would see them park their fancy cars and go into somebody's apartment, and he would think, "Man, that's who I wanna be."

It was about the time he was 14 that Phil figured out what those guys did. At age 15 he talked one of those guys into letting him work as a lookout while the deals were going down. When Tad was 16 he started selling drugs on the streets. By

age 17 he actually had dealers working for him. And for his 18th birthday, he walked into a downtown car dealership wearing a new leather jacket and a new set of gold chains and a new pair of \$200 sneakers, and he paid cash for a big shiny new car.

Tad's empire grew, and he got richer and richer. He was playing with the big boys now, one of the "Big Three" – 30-40% of the drugs in the city were trafficked through him.

Tad was a bad guy. Nobody liked Tad. In fact, the only emotions Tad invoked in other people were fear, or contempt.

One day, Tad was driving his car downtown on a warm sunny day, feeling like a king. He parked his car on the street—he put nothing in the meter, because the cops knew who he was, and they weren't going to mess with him.

Tad got out of the car and looked down the street, and he saw a guy pull up to the corner in a fancy car. Tad recognized the car. It was one of his dealers. He smiled as he thought about the cut he would receive from the deal that was about to go down.

Then Tad became aware of a young girl who had been standing there on the corner. The girl was skinny and gaunt. She looked like she had not eaten for days. Her eyes were red and puffy. Her skin was sallow.

Tad saw the girl run up to the passenger side window and pull wadded up bills out of her pockets and out of her blouse and hand them to the guy in the car. And the guy in the car handed her a small plastic bag.

The young girl came walking down the street, walking fast, because she was going somewhere to use the drugs she just bought.

And when she walked past Tad, he recognized her. **It was his baby sister.**

And all of a sudden Tad was horrified. He felt something he had not felt since he was a little kid. It was called guilt.

On impulse, Tad just started walking. Walking, just walking, as fast as he could. And as he walked, he thought: *How many other young girls who look like that are hooked on my junk?*

And what if some of those kids have died? How many kids have lost their lives because of the poison I put on the street?

*And what if my baby sister **dies**?*

Tad looked up, and right there in front of him was a church. He had been to church before, but it was a long time ago, as a kid, when one of his aunties dragged him to church and tried to make him sit there. Tad acted up and caused trouble and as a result, his aunt never took him back, which was what he wanted in the first place.

Tad had never had any use for church, but now he felt himself being pulled into that stately old church. He climbed the steps and pushed open the heavy wooden door. He went inside and slid into the back row. There was some well-dressed business man way up in front who turned around and looked at him. But Tad just buried his head on the pew in front of him and the tears flowed like rain, and Tad prayed over and over, "God have mercy, Lord have mercy, *God have mercy on me a sinner!*"

And after he'd poured out his soul, Tad looked up and wiped his eyes, and he looked at the big cross way down front, hanging over the altar table. It was actually a crucifix, with a figure of Jesus hanging on the cross.

And Tad could have sworn that the figure on the cross looked right at him -- and spoke! And he heard Jesus say, "Tad – I love you."

And all of a sudden, the most amazing wave of peace came over Tad. He knew he was going to have to make changes. He knew he was going to have to stop what he was doing – and make reparations – he knew he was going to have to find his sister and get her into rehab.

But in that moment, he knew that he was forgiven. He knew he was loved.

And somewhere up in heaven, God and the angels were popping the corks on countless bottles of champagne (non-alcoholic, of course!) They were throwing a huge party. Because as Tad walked out of that church, he was closer to God than he had ever been.

Now, just in case you didn't catch on, that was my version of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, told as if it happened today.

You say, "But Claude – that was shocking! A drug dealer gets forgiven? A good church-going Christian breaks God's heart?"

But you see, that's the way the story would have been perceived at the time Jesus told it! Pharisees were good people. Everybody liked Pharisees. Tax collectors were bad people. Nobody liked tax collectors.

Pharisees were good people who did everything right. Tax collectors were bad people who got rich off the misery of others. *And yet Jesus says it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who found favor with God.*

That's shocking!

Remember who Jesus told this story to in the first place:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable (Luke 18:9).

Last week in England, I heard a preacher say, *"Self-righteousness is the mother of all sin."*

And here's the scary thing: Of all the people on planet earth, who are the ones most likely to fall into the sin of self-righteousness?

Good, church-going people like you and me.

Jesus told this parable to *shock* us. He told this parable to *jolt* us into realizing that when we are self-righteous, we are as far from God as we can possibly be.

Why? What's so bad about being self-righteous? Why would that preacher say that self-righteousness is the mother of all sin?

I can think of at least three reasons:

- 1) When you're being self-righteous, you're not telling the truth—because the fact is, you *are* sinful: "There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10).
- 2) When you're being self-righteous, you're looking down on other people – and God hates that.
- 3) AND WORST OF ALL: When you're being self-righteous, you cannot know *how much God really loves you.*

As long as you're like the Pharisee, saying "Well, look at me – I've earned it," you'll never know what it's like to be loved unconditionally. *And I think that's what hurts God the most.*

Why does God want us to be humble and confess our sins like the tax collector? Is it because God has a sadistic need to watch us beat ourselves up? Is it because God likes it when we say,

"I am worthless, but a worm
Step on me God and watch me squirm?"

No, no, no. LISTEN:

- God wants us to be humble, SO THAT he can lift us up!
- God wants us to confess, SO THAT he can forgive!
- God wants us to admit that we're broken, SO THAT he can make us whole!
- God wants us to stop *pretending* to be righteous, SO THAT he can make us *truly* righteous.

And best of all:

- God wants us to feel the ugliness of our sin SO THAT we can experience the beauty of his UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.

In just a few moments, we're going to give you a chance to humble yourself right here in front of everybody. I've talked to the other pastors, and they're on board with this. We're literally going to give you an opportunity to get up from your seat and come down here in front of God and everybody, and basically say, "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

This opportunity is called...HOLY COMMUNION.

By the very act of receiving communion, you're admitting that you're a sinner and you need Christ to save you. This is not a sacrament for self-righteous people. This is not a religious ritual that shows how good you are. This is a cry for mercy. It's a non-verbal sign-act that says, "I'm a sinner! I'm broken! And I need Jesus!"

When you stretch out your hands to receive communion, you're humbling yourself. You're admitting you're a beggar at the table of grace.

Are you ready to do that?