

When we pray for others, or for ourselves, we reveal to ourselves the true intentions of our hearts. We're not telling God anything new, but perhaps telling ourselves something new. There's nothing unusual about thanking God for our own good fortune but can we continue to thank God for our own misfortune? Can we praise God rain or shine? I wonder what the Pharisee's prayer might be if things were going badly for him, if his reputation for example were sullied in some way, if even being a Pharisee or priest were no longer a credible option, a route to fame and fortune as it were, no longer acceptable to society's norms. The tax collector is already living this reality. The difference perhaps between them is one of illusion. Both men are loved by God – this is a sine qua non of Christian thinking: all saved in Christ because of God's love, but some know it and some don't and find themselves rejecting the possibility of salvation because they are under the illusion, for example, that God does not love them, that God does not exist, or, in this case, that God must love them because of their good deeds and their good fortune. In this sense the Pharisee is living only a half life. Aware of himself and others only in the light of himself. He may think he's praying to God but in reality he's only praying to himself – there's even a hint of that in the text itself “ the Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself ..” It's essentially a narcissistic position though we may have to import other ideas of what some Pharisees and Scribes and Priests were in Jesus' day from elsewhere in his teaching: men he was seeking to save from the illusion that the power and popularity of their office had given them over many years. Its a dynamic anyone in a position of power, of authority, has to be aware of, always. Don't kid yourself that power and authority is given to you because you deserve it because you are a better person than others in some way, because your talents have been recognised at last. No, these are not your talents but the talents given to you by God, leant to you by God, entrusted to you for the service of others. Dare we see even the tax-collector in this light? Someone has to collect taxes for example, or be a soldier, or a refuse collector, or a care worker or a judge, a priest, a lawyer? In this sense the love of God, that is God's love for us and our love for God, is a great leveller – it's not apportioned according to our character or intelligence or the vagaries of descent, our natural or social DNA, but according to our origin in God, created in God's image from the word go, the dignity of being human. This is easily lost sight of when we feel our own dignity is under threat, that is when we delude ourselves into thinking that our dignity depends on our status in society or our appearance or our physical health and wealth. No, the tax collector realises his true position before God as one totally dependent on God for whoever and whatever he is. He may of course be suffering from that other pole of human illusion, which is a sense of unworthiness imposed or learnt from his rejection by others and characterised as sin: it's all my own fault, I deserve to be shunned. But being brought to our knees isn't meant to keep us there, to remain feeling unloved and unwanted. The tax collector too is being called to change to recognise in God's love the possibility of change. The true end to this parable is not a forever polarisation, the Pharisee goes to hell and the tax- collector goes to heaven, but a place of mutual recognition, a place where opposites can embrace, where enemies can be reconciled. Now that's a prayer and a responsibility worth believing in. This of course is also true of the pharisee and tax-collector within each one of us.

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