

23 October 2022

Joel 2:23-32
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

It is said that in many handmade Persian rugs and carpets you will discover a deliberate mistake. Followers of Islam believe only Allah makes things perfectly, and therefore to weave a perfect rug or carpet would be an offence to Allah. It is an exercise of deliberate humility. The deliberate mistake is usually made in the execution of the pattern of the rug, and not in the dying of the wool or silk, and certainly not in the quality of the weaving. The mistakes can be as subtle as the wrong colour being used in a single flower petal.¹ Of course, *unintentional* mistakes can be made at any point in the process.

In Luke 18 Jesus tells a vivid little parable about humility. “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector.” There they join other worshippers gathered for the for the morning or afternoon offering of the atoning sacrifice.² Well, “join” might be too strong a word, for both men stand apart from their countrymen: the Pharisee stands by himself; the tax collector stands afar off. A lamb is sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people. The way to God is thus opened, and as incense is burnt, each of those present has the opportunity to offer personal prayers. As is the custom these personal prayers are offered aloud, so it must have been quite a confusion of voices.

As Jesus tells his story he allows us to listen in on the prayers of two of those gathered, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee, standing aloof from his countrymen, considers himself righteous and despises those he is standing apart from: “God, I thank you that I am not like other

¹ <https://www.orientalrugexperts.com/deliberate-mistakes-in-handmade-persian-rugs-and-carpets/>
See also the discussion and sources referenced at <https://skeptics.stackexchange.com/questions/32361/did-persian-rug-makers-traditionally-include-deliberate-imperfections>

² Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 145-147, explains the setting.

people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

Those who might overhear him are offered an unsolicited lesson in righteousness. But actually the Pharisee’s prayer reveals more about him than it does about righteousness. Prayer in Jewish piety usually involved two primary aspects: the offering of thanks and praise to God for all his gifts; and the presentation of petitions for the worshipper’s needs for himself or his family. This man’s prayer does neither. Rather than thanking God, he boasts of his own self-achieved righteousness. He has no requests.³

Kenneth Bailey describes him as a man “tearing up the fabric of his own spirituality.”⁴

The Pharisee assumes his own righteousness because of his practices of piety: he goes above and beyond what is required and what is customary.⁵ Moses specified an *annual* fast for the Day of Atonement on the 10th day of the 7th month: this Pharisee fasts twice *each week*. The scriptural provision was for tithes to be levied on grain, wine, and oil, and custom had extended the law to take in *most things* used as food: this Pharisee makes a tithe of *all that he has*.

In the Pharisee of his parable, Jesus presents us with “a picture of a man who prides himself on his more than perfect observance of his religion.”⁶ If this Pharisee were a follower of Islam and made rugs, we could imagine him doubling or quadrupling the number of deliberate imperfections in his rugs so as to demonstrate the perfection of his humility. “I’m so glad I don’t make inferior rugs that like one over there – dropped stitches, a design with no symmetry, mismatched colours, and stains from the shop floor. My rugs are so perfect that I have to incorporate many deliberate flaws to show how worthy I am.”

Then the focus shifts from the Pharisee to the one who has been the object of his scorn. The Pharisee lumps this man in with robbers, evildoers, and adulterers. And, indeed, most of Jesus’ audience would have held a similar view. Tax collectors

³ Bailey, pp. 147-150

⁴ Bailey, p.150.

⁵ Bailey, p. 152

⁶ Bailey, p.152.

worked for the hated Roman authorities. They were therefore despised by their countrymen as traitors to their nation and to their God. They were contracted to produce a certain amount of tax income, and if they were able to extort more they got to benefit from the surplus. Not only were they hated as traitors but also because of their unfair, harsh practices.

The tax collector stands afar off. He is no doubt aware of his standing in the community; he knows that people avoid him, so he avoids them. But it becomes clear that there is much more than a social issue here.⁷ He stands afar off because he feels he is not worthy to stand with God's people before the altar. He does not lift his eyes heavenward, and beats upon his chest. The traditional posture for prayer was to cross one's hands over the chest. This man however acts in a manner much more common among women in extreme anguish: he beats upon his chest.

This man knows his need of God. Unlike the Pharisee, his prayer contains petition: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In the original Greek his cry for mercy is literally "God, make atonement for me, a sinner."⁸ In other words, the tax collector wants to receive the benefits of the very service that he is a remote participant in. At the time the atonement sacrifice is made to cover the sins of the people, this sinner knows that he needs to be included, he knows his need: "O God, let it be for me! Make atonement for me!"

If this tax collector were a Persian rug maker, he would not be making deliberate mistakes in his rugs: he knows that the poor quality of his rug making efforts means that he is no threat to the perfection of Allah.

Where are we in this scene?

The easy and obvious answer, given Jesus' concluding affirmation, is to see ourselves in the tax collector, recognising our flaws and seeking God's mercy.

⁷ Bailey, pp. 152-154

⁸ Bailey, p.154

However, there may well be times when we find ourselves with the Pharisee. Too sure of ourselves and our position. Seeing ourselves in the right, and unwilling to listen to those with a contrary view; unwilling to consider what it might mean to stand in the shoes of another and see the world through the eyes of their experience. Stereotyping and branding those “not like me”.

Ironically, even if we choose to identify with the tax collector, we might at times find ourselves in fact with the Pharisee as we pray, or say to ourselves, “I thank God that I am not like that Pharisee, puffed up with his own importance and self-righteousness...”⁹

And it is not hard to think of many variations on this theme. Comparison is a dangerous business, especially when it involves stereotypes and caricature. We see it all the time in the culture of our land, where it seems we are increasingly unable to respect and seek understanding of those who hold views other than our own. It is sadly no less true of the Church, where Christians of whatever hue and stripe seem go about offering thanks that they are not like those other Christians over there.

We know humility is a virtue, so we want to identify with the humble. The problem is that a show of humility can easily become its very opposite. Ironically, the rug-maker who puts a deliberate flaw in his rug to avoid offending the perfection of Allah is in effect saying that he does in fact make otherwise perfect rugs: if he didn't think he made perfect rugs then he wouldn't need to add a deliberate flaw because the rug would feature unintended ones already and pose no risk of offence!

Jesus' little story challenges us against arrogance and the lack of true humility; it corrects us from our tendency to look down on others, or to treat with contempt those who hold different views or whose situation is different from our own.

These are good, and important points, but they are not at the centre of the matter. Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector is not one that could be re-set in

⁹ Garland, *Luke*, p.723

other contexts, as if it were merely about the contrasted words and attitudes of the two men. If Jesus was making a point about humility and so on, he could just as well have made up a story in which the Pharisee expresses his contempt in the marketplace, for instance.

The centre of the matter is the question of what makes us righteous; what it is that puts us in right standing with God. The parable is like a series of concentric circles.¹⁰ Right at the centre is the Pharisee's declaration that shows that he sees his righteousness as revolving around his exceptional acts of piety. That centre is encircled by a layer in which the question is what the tax collector is like: before the Pharisee's declaration we have his scathing assumption of the tax collector's character; and after comes the tax collector's self-assessment, the reality. Around this is the next layer, in which we have the manner and the prayer of each of the two men: first the Pharisee who stands aloof and thanks God that he is not like other men; second the tax collector beating his chest and pleading for atonement. The outer layer is the entry and exit of the two characters: at the beginning two go up to the temple, a Pharisee and a tax collector; at the end two go to their homes, only one of whom has been made righteous.

And all this is framed within an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction we are told that Jesus tells the parable to people who considered *themselves* righteous. At the conclusion Jesus makes the summary point: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." This conclusion may sound like this is all about simple humility again, but we need recall the context, and we need to understand what is meant by "exalted".

Jesus tells the story to people who considered themselves righteous, and places his story in the context of the temple's services of atonement. This is all about one's standing with God.

¹⁰ Technically, the structure is described as chiasmic or inverted parallelism, in which parallel phrases are arranged moving inwards towards, and outwards from, the central point. (See Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, xvii-xviii for a description of the general point, and pp. 142-143 for the specifics relating to this passage). I chose the idea of concentric circles as something easier to envisage on hearing.

To be exalted is, in the Old Testament, to be drawn close to God.¹¹ Jesus is not talking about social rank, or about someone's humility or elevation among one's fellow human beings. This is all about one's relationship with God.

The Pharisee of the parable makes several related mistakes.¹² He is self-absorbed, living in smug complacency, assuming that everything is in order between himself and God. He is showing off, performing and publicly announcing deeds above the requirements of the law. He finds security in comparing himself to others, pumping up his own performance by highlighting the defects of others. This prevents him from understanding how God could show mercy to sinners. He implicitly pronounces judgement on others who are, he thinks, less dutiful. He forgets that God loves those who come with empty hands as well as those who labour mightily. And he forgets that it is God alone who is holy. In the face of God's perfect holiness, all should recognise that they are not worthy.

We do well to remember that the atonement sacrifice was offered for the benefit of the whole people of God, and thus for *all* present in the temple that day. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector could avail themselves of God's reconciling work. However, by not seeing and acknowledging his need, the Pharisee implicitly rejected that gracious work of God, rendering it worthless to him.

We are challenged then to consider how right-standing with God is achieved. Jesus proclaims that righteousness is a gift of God made possible by means of the atonement sacrifice, which is received by those who, in humility, approach as sinners trusting in God's grace and not their own righteousness.¹³

In the rug-making of our own lives, we need not look over our shoulders to make comparisons with others, and we don't need the false humility of deliberate flaws. We simply bring the best we have managed to do – no matter how poor that is – grateful in the knowledge that our God has given us the reconciling work of Jesus. We come, imperfect, to the only One who is perfect in his grace.

¹¹ Bailey, pp.155-156

¹² The following summarises Garland, *Luke*, pp.721-722

¹³ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p.156.

Sources

- Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, Eerdmans 1980
- David E Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Zondervan, 2011
- Kathryn M Schifferdecker, "Preaching with humility and compassion", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/with-humility-and-compassion>
- Francisco J Garcia, "Commentary on Luke 18:9-14", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-5>
- Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001/2004