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In today's gospel, Jesus describes a pharisee and a tax collector who are praying in the temple of Jerusalem.

The pharisees were a sect devoted to strict adherence to the law.

Unlike the Saducees, who were scriptural literalists, the pharisees performed scholarly interpretations of scripture.

Some of the Pharisees were followers of Jesus, like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Paul, and Gamaliel.

They reached out to all the people whereas the Saducees, who formed a large part of the upper class, were a closed group, somewhat like aristocrats.

Because of their openness to everyone, the pharisees enjoyed a certain popularity among the Jewish populace.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were hated far more than the IRS.

They levied taxes for the Roman occupiers and extracted their own salaries in the process.

In the parable, the pharisee and the tax collector are both talking with God.

The pharisee is confident in his own righteousness.

He is not someone who wakes up at 4:00 AM and wonders, "Could I have handled that better? Am I really doing my best? Maybe I should have said something else."

He instead stands in the temple in the light of day and says, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

Imagine being able to sleep soundly in the knowledge that you have done so much that is prescribed by your religion.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is a Jew who supports the oppression of his fellow Jews and makes them pay him to do so.

By common standards, there is little to admire in this behavior, and he knows it.

He prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Yet Jesus says that it is the tax collector who leaves the temple justified.

The passive voice is very important here.

The pharisee seeks to justify himself (“I am not like other people”), but the tax collector is justified by God.

It is, you see, only God who can make just, not us.

The context of the parable helps us to understand better what is going on in this passage.

Jesus is telling this to someone who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

What is wrong with trusting in one’s own righteousness?

Well, it is not our righteousness, but God working through us that creates righteousness.

We can either allow God to work through us, or we can stand in God's way.

The unrighteousness is all ours, in other words, but the righteousness is God's.

We can fast and go to church and give money to the poor, but if we imagine that it is all about us, that the good within us comes from our individuality, then we are making ourselves into God.

Remember the story about the fall of Satan, the brightest and most beautiful angel, being caused by pride in himself?

When we do what is truly good, what is in accord with and in profound relationship with God, we do it through God.

When we imagine that it is us alone, we misunderstand the very structure of reality.

Simply put, we fail to grasp that we are a part of God.

When we act as if we were not, we do evil.

Our actions may be exactly what our society admires, what our religion prescribes, but if we think we are doing it on our own, we are not justified because we are denying our profound connection with God.

God works through us not as an outsider, not as a spirit that possesses us or as a puppeteer who manipulates us, but as a part of Godself.

We have free will, however.

In order for God to work through us, we first must accept our true nature as having emanated from God.

Now the parable makes more sense.

The tax collector was justified because he was honest with God, because he acknowledged that the things he was doing separated him from his own Godly nature.

God respects this.

Would you rather have a friend who says, “You’re going to love being my friend because I am an amazing person!” or a friend who says, “I care about us and I let you down. I’m sorry.”

It is those who feel that they justify themselves who are the least dependable.

The person who brags the most is usually the least skilled.

It might sound like Paul is bragging in his letter to Timothy.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day.”

If we continue, however, we see that he is aware that God was working through him.

“the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed To him be the glory forever and ever.”

Paul knows that he did not run the race alone.

God gave him strength.

God protected him.

God worked through him.

To God be the glory.

It can be difficult to understand how we are a part of God, how we can be God’s hands in the world, yet have our own free will.

I think it might help to consider the octopus, and not just because I think octopuses are amazing, but because about two thirds of octopuses’ neurons are in their arms, not their head.

They have eight arms, nine brains all connected together.

Imagine if an arm thought itself as independent—“I do what I want.”

That would be a major malfunction, what we would call sin.

The well being of the whole is preserved only when the arms work not for themselves, but allow the electrical impulses that communicate throughout the entire system to work together through them.

The cost of allowing God to work through us, however, is that we might wake up in the middle of the night and worry that we somehow got in God's way, yet it is much better for us to be in that position than in the self-satisfied position of the pharisee.

To God be the glory.