

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Every Head Bowed and Every Eye Closed”

Luke 18: 9-14

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It's fascinating really... the way we human beings are drawn to sacred places. We have a thing for the temple. We've built temples along the way because we know we need a place where we can, sort of, do business with the ultimate.

We need a point of contact... of focus.

We need a place of easier access...

Thin places... as the Celtics call them.

We hunger for the holy... we feel some need to get dangerously close to the Divine where something changes. So we've always had sacred places... temples and altars. And these are places we're suppose to reverence.

As Baptist, we haven't been so good at that. Oh, we heard growing up, “**Don't run in God's house,**” but we did. When no one was looking and sometimes even when they were. We didn't have the sense that this was someplace where you ought not be fooling around.

Ever have races under the pews? We used to get at the back of the sanctuary and race, crawling commando style to the front of the church. It was our altar... but not really. There was no place to kneel... no invitation to humility. No awe. Nothing that said, “**Handle with care.**”

One Sunday morning, we snuck Benny James into the communion table. (It was hollow and had a removable lid.) He stayed in there through the entire service.

Clearly... we didn't have a sense of what ought to be taking place when we were on holy ground. Or at least not a very good sense.

The closest we came was during invitation time... when the organ started playing and the choir started humming and the pastor said... “**Every head bowed... and every eye closed.**” The pastoral word was... bow the head and close your eyes. This is serious... no peeking... no looking around. We bowed heads and closed eyes when it was time to do business.

That's what ought to happen at any altar... in the Temple. Reverence before what is real... most real. Like everything fake has been peeled away. There's no hiding... no game playing. And the only thing to see is God and my need of what God alone can give. The only thing to look at is the gap between where I am and real wholeness.

Apparently on the day Jesus told this parable Luke records for us, there were some folks near by who had a different sort of experience when they went into the temple to pray.

When they entered they weren't so in need.

They weren't all that hungry.

They were full... full of themselves.

They even prayed about themselves... Jesus says. The Pharisee goes into the temple, walks down to the altar, and gets into a conversation with God about himself. “**God, I thank you... that I'm not like other men. Bad guys.**” “**It's so good, God, being good... You'll notice how disciplined I am, fasting and tithing and all.**”

His altar behavior is a lot like me and my buddies back at Northlake Baptist Church... sort of gamey. Like there's some contest taking place... some righteousness race.

He's head is not bowed... and his eyes certainly aren't closed. He's eyeing that sinner nearby. And aware that by comparison, he's quite a righteous specimen. And by the yardsticks we use... he is. He is good... and the tax collector, or Publican as some translate it... (the Living Bible says, "really, rotting, stinker") over to the side... really is bad.

He's a cheat...

He takes advantage of people...

He'll get in bed with any sleaze if it helps him.

But at the end of the parable... at the end of the day... he's the one who leaves justified. Standing as he does... reverently with his head bowed and eyes closed. Seeing himself as he does and his need, "**God have mercy on me, a sinner...**" Or as it's probably better translated, "**The sinner.**" He doesn't water it down at all by saying, "**Yeah, me and the rest of the human race... I'm a sinner too.**" Nope, "**The Sinner.**"

He bows his head,

Closes his eyes,

Opens his heart...

And when he leaves, Jesus says, he's the one who has been impacted by his trip to the temple... not the good guy.

The jolt of this parable is hard for us to feel. Particularly if we've grown up in church because when we read the gospels and we hear... "**The Pharisees,**" we hear the Darth Vader music in the background.

"**And the Pharisees...**" Dum, dum, da dum, dum da dum, dum da dum." To us, they aren't good guys... but they were. They had family values. They did what was right... and apparently... spiritually speaking we may be most vulnerable when that's our profile.

When your up...

you tend to look down....

which is what Luke says they were doing.

They feel okay... because they are good... they really are. And a little goodness can go a long way towards a lot of self-righteousness.

I think it's hard to hear this parable the way they heard it. Jesus would have to tell it differently for lots of us to get it.

*When Jesus saw the folks filing into DaySpring each Sunday as they do, he told them this parable.*

*"Verily, verily, some DaySpringers went into worship to pray... and as they worshipped they were aware of one another and aware of other people... as they prayed to God.*

*And one said, 'Lord, I'm glad I'm not like those who are here so infrequently. I'm a regular attender. I volunteered for two chart positions. And I even show up for "Take Two.'*

*Another said, God, I'm so thankful that I'm a part of an open-minded church and not like those silly fundamentalists.*

*I read all the time... even Flannery O'Connor.*

*Vote for the most progressive candidates...*

*And always use inclusive language."*

*Still another said, “God, I thank you that I stand firm for the things that really matter. Thank you that I’m not like those modernists who can’t make up their minds.*

*I fight the good fights,*

*I’m not afraid to have convictions.”*

*And another prayed, “God I thank you that I’m not like those who get mad and can’t forgive...”*

*And another, “That I’m not like those who seem to be so driven and in such need to be a somebody... bless their hearts.”*

*And another prayed,*

*“That I’m not like those who can’t relax and lighten up.”*

*... that I don’t sing praise choruses.*

*... that I’m not stuck in traditions.*

*One stood a prayed, “God, I’m so glad I’m not like that Pharisee in the parable that we just read.”*

On and on... like a broken record we go... seeing distinctions and justifying ourselves by them. It’s like a collective bad habit... and though it’s the world’s plague, sometimes it seems we Christians are the worst about it.

I was with an old friend this week who is a pastor and a church consultant. Recently, he was with George Barna, this researcher who focuses mostly on the church and faith. Barna said in a recent survey they’d tried to determine what was different about Christians.

Barna said there were two things, **“One, Christians go to church more than non Christians.”** (My friend said, **“And you get paid for coming up with stuff like this?”**)

The second thing that was different about Christians was, **“That we are more judgmental than nonChristians.”** That’s sad... but maybe not so surprising.

We’re just so focused on getting it right and we spend lots of time thinking about that and we go to the temple a lot... and to the altar... and the familiarity of it is a problem perhaps. We forget what we’re dealing with and we can’t see who we are and what we need. So our heads aren’t bowed and our eyes aren’t closed.

We see the other... **“I’m sure glad I’m not...”** and miss ourselves in the process.

Yesterday, we went to see the A&M game (God forgive me). And it’s quite a deal... parking somewhere in town and getting there on buses. 80,000 folks jammed in Kyle field and then hustling back to the buses.

Julie and I found our bus and sat down... and folks were climbing aboard. A young man... student... got on and apparently had some problem with his leg... He said real loud where most of the bus could hear. **“Blankety-blank shin splints.”** And then he walked by with a fashionable hole in his pants so that we all could see his boxers and his rear.

And I’m thinking, **“What a jerk... what a small human being... God, I thank you that I’m not like that idiot.”**

It’s just there.

There’s a story that emerges from the Desert Fathers about Abba Moses.

*It happened that one of the brothers in the community committed a serious sin. The elders held a meeting and asked Abba Moses to join them.*

*He however refused to come. The priest sent him a message in the following terms: **“Come, the community is waiting for you.”** So then he arose and started the journey, carrying an old basket with a hole in it. He filled it with sand and dragged it behind him.*

*The elders went to meet him and asked him, **“Father, what does this mean?”** The old man answered, **“it is my sins running our behind me and I do not notice them. That is how I am coming today to judge the sins of another.”***

*Upon hearing this they said nothing to the brother and pardoned him.” (Clement, 284)*

Those who’ve progressed... the saints through the ages say... that judgement is that last and hardest thing to rid ourselves of. It’s who we are, it’s our human instinct... we justify ourselves by pointing. It’s been that way from the beginning. Remember Adam in the garden caught with that forbidden fruit, **“Who me... no God... it’s that woman you gave me.”**

Got to get that separation. **“I’m glad I’m not like that woman you gave me.” “Glad I’m not like that tax collector.” Glad I’m not like all those other preachers who still wear suits on Sunday.”**

One wiser more accomplished saint wrote in recent years, **“I have spent 28 years fighting to see all human beings as one.”** (From the “Sayings of those Who Grow Old in Asceticism.”)

This is what happens to us and in us and with us... when we come rightly to the altar of Christ. The altar is what turns the other into a neighbor and where our enemies are made known to me as myself. It’s like this is the center point and each life is a radius but they all meet here.

The further away from this reality they are...

the further a part they are.

But... the nearer they are...

they can see their sameness.

Oneness. (From For the Life of the World)

That’s what happens when we come here properly... We see. We see ourselves and God... and there’s never one without the other. Richard Rohr says that any authentic revelation of God will reveal to us our true self and any seeing of our true self will lead to a deeper seeing of God.

That’s what can happen here in the temple. Where you come and the only sacrifice you bring is yourself... that small notion you have of who you are. There’s nothing to claim here but your own need... but everything to receive.

We let go of every self-definition and title and tribute... and we receive what only God can give. Isn’t that what you need? Isn’t that what the world needs? Folks who’ve been at altars with heads bowed and eyes closed... who move away from that center point knowing they are loved unconditionally and God willing, empowered to do the same. As Kurt said at Lectionary Breakfast... **“walking benedictions.”**

It’s what the world needs. It’s what you need and what you can have today.