

Years ago I worked with a fellow who seemed to me to be arrogant and lazy. Whenever he was given a task he would fail at it and expect someone to cover for him, or he would dither his time away until he could not get it done and depend on someone to pick up the project and do it for him. Those that hired him seemed to not care that he was not caring his load. He was still the golden boy in their eyes.

Then his behavior and performance got worse. He would not show up for work or show up looking like something the cat dragged in. He would show up for important events unshaven, smelly, ruffled, and apparently hung over or still intoxicated. He decided he was in the wrong job and would pursue a degree the same field as his father. This only added to his stress, and it was not long before he was out of the program.

Then I heard reports that he was living in his car, huffing whip-its, and drinking heavily. His girlfriend who had tried to be supportive broke up with him. He eventually ended up in a rehab program. However it took several attempts before it took. That is before he hit bottom.

I heard about him off and on over several years, but nothing directly. Then one day I received a message through Facebook that he wanted to talk with me in person, there was something he needed to say. Before we even spoke I realized that he had joined a twelve-step program and was now at step 8. That is the step where the person makes a list of all persons he has harmed, and makes amends.

In today's gospel we have someone like him in the tax collector; someone who because of his actions was not easy to love or care for. We also have the Pharisee who seems to be living a blameless life. We who have heard so many parables where Pharisees are the bad guys need to adjust our hearing to that of a first-century Jew. In that time Pharisees as a group were the ones who were behind a reformation of Judaism. They refocused religious life on a closer observance of the Moses' teachings. They taught and practiced a reverence for the Torah. They followed the commandments and taught others to do so. They stood in contrast to the Sadducees who had sold out to the Roman Empire in order to keep power in the Temple. St. Paul was trained in the Pharisaic tradition, and some scholars believe that Jesus also was trained as a Pharisee.

Despite these many positive attributes of the Pharisees in Jesus' parables the Pharisee often plays the foil for an average Jew. In this parable the Pharisee is over the top. As he stands prominently in the temple courtyard his prayer is not really a prayer at all. Rather it is a list of self-congratulation on how well he has kept all of the laws. He thanks God for being better than sinners. Specifically he 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."<sup>1</sup> Essentially he does not so much thank God as tell God why he is better than others. He fasts and tithes.

In contrast, the publican or tax collector importunes God for mercy. He stands away from others in the Temple courtyard. He cannot look to heaven he is so ashamed of who he is. He beats his chest, a symbolic gesture of humility and disgrace for his

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:11 NRSV

sins. He does not recite the good things he has done. Instead, he simply states that he is a sinner and begs for forgiveness.

Jesus says that the Pharisee, who is righteous under the law, is not justified. While the tax collector, the lowest of the low in society, is justified. Jesus is pointing out that the Pharisee is not justified, because he does not realize where mercy and grace come from. He has fooled himself into thinking that he is justified because he has been righteous. That is that he has earned his justification. While the tax collector realizes that justification only comes from God.

We might wonder, as I often have, what is justification mean in this context. A theological definition is “the action of declaring or making righteous in the sight of God.” The Pharisee could have performed all of his righteous acts and even thanked God for his better station in life. If he had gone on to accept that what he had done did not make him any more worthy than the tax collector, he would have been made righteous in God’s eyes. However, it is his apparent claim of having earned his righteousness through his own actions that puts him in the position of being unjustified. The tax collector knew his actions were not as they should be. He begged for mercy, knowing that it was only God who could save him.

Jesus wants us to be like the tax collector, not so much in his sins, but in his recognition that there is no way for him to earn his justification before God. That is something God has given him and you and me and even the Pharisee. Our works do not save us. God saves us and our works are a way we give thanks for God’s generosity. The teachings of Moses and the many commandments the Pharisee followed were not his or anyone’s key to salvation. Following the commandments is a way of giving thanks. That is what my coworker had to learn, the Pharisee had to learn, what the tax collector was learning, and what we too have to learn regardless of our addiction whether it is alcohol, money, power, self, or any of a myriad of temptation that draw us away from God. As Jeremiah wrote when we set our hope on God for it is God who can save us. Once we admit that we are on the way to a rich and truly righteous life in this world and the world to come.

+++++

#### **12 Steps of AA – What Are They?<sup>2</sup>**

AA’s 12-Step approach follows a set of guidelines designed as “steps” toward recovery, and members can revisit these steps at any time. The 12 Steps are:<sup>9</sup>

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

---

<sup>2</sup> From the website <https://www.alcohol.org/alcoholics-anonymous/> accessed 10/26/19

Gene LeCouteur  
Emmanuel Episcopal Church  
Middleburg, VA

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
8:00 & 10:30 a.m.  
October 27, 2019

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

For more information on Alcoholics Anonymous go to [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org).