

October 26, 2025—The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

Mirrors

This is one of those stories that seems pretty straightforward on the surface, right? You could almost boil it down to “the parable of the self-righteous and the humble”—a simple title for a simple parable with a simple message: Being self-righteous is bad, and being humble is good. Everybody knows that. There’s nothing terribly surprising here, is there?

OK, well, the first rule of understanding the parables of Jesus is, if you haven’t found something surprising, you’re probably not looking hard enough. I always try to remind myself, whenever I’m reading the Gospels, that if I’m not at least a little bit outraged I’m probably missing the point.

So let’s look a little more closely. On the one hand, we have a fine, upstanding citizen who does everything right. He’s not an adulterer or a rogue or a thief, which might seem like a pretty low bar but it does put him above a pretty significant percentage of famous people in our country, don’t you think? When it comes time to fill out his estimate of giving, he writes down ten percent of his income. Ten percent! That’s a lot. And he fasts twice a week! You know, I used to be pretty religious about fasting on Ash Wednesday every year, but it got to the point where I was just cranky all day, and I decided maybe the fast wasn’t having quite the spiritual effect I was looking for. So good for this guy, who manages to fast twice a week and presumably not fly into a hangry rage at work. But he is not the one who’s justified in this story. So what’s his crime? He thanks God that he’s not like *other* people, especially the tax collector. It seems fair to assume that he’s one of the kind of people Luke mentions in his introduction to this parable: “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

So then on the other hand, we have the tax collector. He’s not just working for the IRS, like Jim used to do, he’s working for the enemy. He’s a traitor, a quisling, a collaborator—conspiring with Rome, the occupying enemy power, to keep his own people oppressed for the sake of his own personal gain. And yet, somehow, that’s the guy who ends up justified? He’s the one who is exalted, because he humbles himself, refusing to even lift his eyes toward heaven and beating his breast as he begs for mercy? He doesn’t give any indication that he plans to change his sinful ways, and he’s the one we’re supposed to be rooting for? That hardly seems fair!

And I’m pretty sure that’s how Jesus expected his listeners to respond to this parable. It’s not fair. It’s not right. It doesn’t make any sense. Why would God lift up a guy like that, a sinner and a traitor, instead of a pious person who’s doing everything right?

So what is the actual point that Jesus is trying to make, here? That it’s OK to be an awful human being as long as we remain humble? And giving a tenth of your income is actually a horrible thing if it makes you self-righteous?

No, I don’t think that’s the point. I think the reason that Jesus told parables that turned expectations upside down and sparked at least a little bit of outrage is because they give us an opportunity to look at things in a different way. This parable is an opportunity, an invitation to see *ourselves* differently, and to look at ourselves with total honesty.

That’s actually harder than it sounds, I think, because the world holds up a bunch of mirrors to our faces and none of them show our true reflection.

I might look in one mirror and see a miserable wretch weighed down with sin, a worm in the hands of an angry God who’s ready to throw me into a fire. But that’s not my true reflection, nor is it a true image of the God revealed in and by Jesus Christ.

I might look in another mirror and see a pretty decent guy, especially in comparison to the thieves and rogues and adulterers and politicians and movie stars I can see at the edge of the mirror—I sure look better than they do. But that’s not my true reflection, either, and it’s certainly not a true picture of the people around me—even the politicians.

I might look in a mirror and feel pretty good about how humble I am! Wow, yeah, I'm doing great on that score, hashtag humblebrag—I don't know if that's still a thing on social media—but that's like multiple layers of distortion, a distorted image of a distorted image.

And speaking of social media, that's like a whole wacky fun house full of mirrors that make me look so small while everyone else looks so big, and leaves me wondering what I'm doing wrong. Not to mention an outrage machine carefully curated to make me angry because anger drives engagement which makes money for advertisers.

And speaking of advertisers, they just love to hold up distorted mirrors to us all, making us feel fat and old and out of touch so that we'll buy the hot new thing they're trying to sell us to correct the imperfections the mirror shows us.

So I can look in any one of these mirrors the world holds up to me, and I can let them shape my idea of who I am and who the people around me are and even who God is. And most days, I look in all of them. I am the Pharisee *and* the tax collector in this parable, and that can leave me feeling pretty confused about myself and my relation to the world.

Or... instead of letting the mirrors shape and skew my perceptions, I can stand far off and not even look up to heaven, but take a real, honest look at myself, and realize the hard, but wonderfully liberating truth:

That it's not all about me.

My righteousness isn't going to justify me in the eyes of God. Figuring out how to fast without turning into a cranky, hangry mess or dial up my giving isn't going to justify or vindicate me, even if it is good for the soul. And figuring out how to be truly humble isn't going to vindicate me, either. I could be as righteous as the Pharisee and as humble as the tax-collector, and I still can't justify myself—only God can do that.

And on the flip side, my sin can't cut me off from the love of God. Even if I were a wretched, traitorous tax collector, or, for that matter, a stuck-up, self-righteous jerk, God's love for me would remain, steadfast and unchanging.

It's not all about me. It's not about how I can fulfill God's requirements in order to secure my reward or to avoid divine punishment—now or in the age to come.

It's all about God. It's about how God loves us enough to live and die as one of us. It's about how God sets us free—free to live out our lives in grateful response to that amazing love. God sets us free to live with love and care, not contempt, for our neighbors. God sets us free to live honestly, not comparing ourselves to others, or believing the lies we see in the mirrors the world holds up all around us, but seeing ourselves for who we authentically are: beloved human people made in God's image, broken people being formed in Christ's likeness, hopeful people clinging to the love and mercy of God.

Thanks be to God.