

“There Because of the Grace of God Go I!”

Luke 18:9-14

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Talking about money in church can be difficult. Greg Jones, a United Methodist pastor, Dean of Duke Divinity School, and a regular contributor to *The Christian Century* tells the story of the time he was asked by a local Presbyterian church for some assistance. It was just after the PCUSA had produced its somewhat controversial Report on Human Sexuality and the local Presbyterian church asked Dean Jones to lead a four-part series on the subject. Reluctant to wade into such uncharted and turbulent denominational waters, he politely declined. But the Presbyterians were desperate for someone to fill the lectern of the weekly adult forum so they begged him and told him he could lead a four-part class on whatever topic he chose. So, as Greg Jones closed his first lesson in his series on Money and Faith, he sent the class home with a homework assignment. They were to come to class the next week with their Bibles and their checkbooks, prepared to pass them around to the rest of the class so they could be examined for evidence of leading a Christian, Gospel-centered life, to see how faith is reflected in our day to day practices. Greg Jones is proud of the fact that he singlehandedly unified a divided congregation by offering what quickly became a one-week lecture series. If there is a harder thing to do than live according to Kingdom

economics, it's talking about it. It's the last taboo in the church, even if not in Jesus' mind.

Before we delve into the parable of the man who gave 10% and the other man who gave everything, let me offer you some statistics to file away for future reference or your next cocktail party. The average Presbyterian gives around 2.3% of his or her annual income for the work of Christ through the church. Members of other denominations are at a similar level. In case you were wondering, the Mormons are at the top at just over 7%. According to conservative estimates, there would be available to the world for gospel-proclaiming, life-transforming, justice-producing, disciple-making ministries an additional \$143 billion, yes billion with a B, if all members of historically Christian churches tithed, or in other words, gave the Biblically-based 10% of their annual income. And that's not even including a tithe of their investment income.

So, file that away and open up your Bible to Luke 18:9-14 in which we find Jesus telling a parable about a certain Pharisee and a certain tax collector who wound up in the temple praying nearby to one another. Praying to the same God, we find an upstanding citizen who follows God's teaching, including fasting and tithing, and a despicable turncoat of a character who might as well have sold his mother when he accepted a job with the Romans collecting from his own Jewish brothers and sisters taxes to fund their oppression. Conveniently forgetting for a moment how the story ends, would it not be safe to say that most of us think of

ourselves in the category of the Pharisee rather than the tax collector? After all, we really are more like the upstanding Pharisee. We don't engage in un-civilized or anti-Christian business practices. We obey the law of the land, we try to follow the Ten Commandments, we give faithfully to the church. We are thankful that we are not like thieves, rogues, and adulterers and we should be! For the most part, we feel no great need to spend a whole lot of time dwelling on our sin, beating our breasts, asking for God's mercy. Some of us may have a keener identification with the tax collector, having been down roads we'd rather have missed, but in general good Christians are a lot like good Pharisees: comfortable with knowing, as the old saying goes, that "there but for the grace of God go I."

The Tax Collector on the other hand has a different outlook on life, at least standing there in the temple, an outlook which just might be a little more Christ-like than Christian. The man who felt so sinful he would not even look up to heaven has found it, Jesus advises, precisely because he has come to that place in his life where he does not say "There but for the grace of God go I," but instead, "There because of the grace of God go I." "There because of the grace of God go I." It's a subtle distinction, no doubt, but an important one. You see, in all his law abiding and fasting and tithing, the Pharisee has given up just what is required of him, but no more; the tax collector has given up all of himself, and no less.

Expressing gratitude for being able to be superior to others is a back door attempt at seeking praise from the Almighty. Confessing one's sin before the Almighty in

the Temple is pouring yourself out completely. Jesus frames this difference in the language of exaltation and humility: “I tell you, this man, this tax collector, went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Let’s be clear about what has happened here. The Pharisee is not condemned because he fasted and tithed, but even though he fasted and tithed. It is not these practices which are condemned, but rather the false humility derived from them which leads the Pharisee to the practice of passing spiritual judgment on others.

Now, on this Sunday before Consecration Sunday, a week before you are asked to sincerely and prayerfully consider how much of your income God is calling you to give to Christ’s work through this church, if after hearing this parable you think you are off the hook for a lesson on tithing since repentance seems to be valued over cash, you will be disappointed. The distinction I am making, and which I believe Jesus is making, is that following Christ means giving everything, and not only the minimum. In Biblical times, woe betide the Pharisee who did not give 10%, the minimum acceptable for “membership” in that circle, using “membership” for the lack of a better word. And so the Pharisee is practicing a minimalist, scarcity-oriented approach to life. He gives just enough to be respectable and acceptable but not enough to be generous, and he gives thanks for not being one of “those people” but does not seek God’s grace to serve “those people” who might be in need of what he has to offer. He ought to have prayed,

“Lord be merciful to me, for I am *only* a tither.” In contrast, the Tax Collector gives himself over completely to God’s abundant mercy and grace. It may well be that the tax collector in this parable is supposed to be that more famous sycamore tree climbing tax collector named Zacchaeus we hear about in the next chapter of Luke whose own repentance entailed giving away fully half of his possessions to the poor and repaying those he defrauded four times as much. But even if it does not, that second story demonstrates what happens when our hearts and souls are laid bare before the God from whom we cannot really hide. It takes a strong person to be that humble.

“There because of the grace of God go I” is more than just a new spin on an old saying. There is certainly a lot of gratitude in the old saying, “There but for the grace of God go I,” but often a lot of pity, and sometimes, as the Pharisee shows us, judgment and self-righteousness, and comparison with others. The Pharisee may not have been looking at the Tax Collector when he said, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” but he must surely have had him in mind. He was measuring his own faith by stacking it up against the faith of others, or at least his perception on the faith of others. But to say, “There because of the grace of God go I” is to think differently about what God is doing in your life. It’s the difference between being saved from something, and being saved for something. It’s a saying for the future, not the past. It’s a saying that depends only on your relationship with God and not anyone else’s. It’s a saying with directionality, with movement. It’s

also a saying with a lot of power and a saying that offers hope and courage, a saying you can always carry around with you. It's the kind of thing you can say to yourself as you march through the difficult moments of your life: "There, because of the grace of God go I." It's the kind of thing you can say to yourself when you are about to take a risk: "There, because of the grace of God go I." And with respect to your generosity, as we explore the discipline of generosity this Lent, it's the kind of thing you can say as you decide for the first time to give proportionally and intentionally to Christ's ministry through the church: "There, because of the grace of God, go I." It's the kind of thing you can say as you decide to take a step up in your giving, to go from that average of 2.3 percent to 4, or from 4 percent to 5: "There, because of the grace of God, go I." It's the kind of thing you can say when you decide to take the plunge and tithe: "There, because of the grace of God, go I."

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the distance between the head and the heart is measured in terms of a right relationship with God. This is frightening to those of us like myself and the Pharisee who are more head-oriented than heart-oriented. The Pharisee is not the only person to rationalize his or her behavior while praying in the temple, appealing to what we believe to be the right thing to do. The heart, the place where God promised through Jeremiah that the intimate knowledge of God would be written, is to be seen in the beautiful prayer of the Tax Collector. The heart that knows that God will provide and knows that

God will be merciful is the heart which can give everything even if it is given incrementally as we grow in faith. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that using our God-given head knowledge and head wisdom is to be discouraged. Quite the contrary. Good stewardship demands that we use all the gifts God has given us. What I am suggesting is that we spend at least as much time cultivating our hearts as our heads, for turning everything over to God is a form of logic only the heart can understand.

On the average person, there are about 18 inches between the head and the heart, though sometimes the distance might as well be measured in light years. We spend our lives struggling with the tension between these two powerful instincts, trying to keep them balanced, trying to keep one from overwhelming the other. But God is not without humor or mercy, and halfway between the head and the heart lies the mouth, the place where Gregory Jones ran into trouble when he asked people to share their checkbooks with one another. In the week that remains before Consecration Sunday, I would encourage you to find someone with whom you can speak about matters of faith and money, someone you can trust, and share a little about where your heart and your head are right now with respect to your relationship with God and the gratitude you feel for the grace you experience in your life. Are you, at this point in your life, tending towards thinking, “There but for the grace of God go I,” or “There because of the grace of God go I”? And as you make plans on how to move from the former to the latter, how you will live

into the grace you experience in Jesus Christ, let me suggest that your giving and generosity will be some of the leading indicators of your humility and trust in God.

Let me leave you with the thought that in today's society, it is an act of immense humility and an enormous expression of trust in God to live on just 90% of what you earn. There are likely few of us who do not worry at least a little about our ability to pay the bills, and for most of us, our tendency to rely on ourselves and what we can earn easily overwhelms our dependence on God to bless us with abundant life. If it weren't so, I daresay the church around the world would *already* be a church full of tithers with another \$143 billion a year to use to for gospel-proclaiming, life-transforming, justice-producing, disciple-making ministries, a church of people who proudly say, "There because of the grace of God, go I!" But as I am sure the Tax Collector experienced, the blessings to be gained by giving everything to God far outweigh those to be gained by giving just enough to appear respectable or meet an obligation. May God bless us all as we consider this important issue in our lives. Amen.