

## “Getting out of the TRAP with Open Hands and Hearts”

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Immanuel Lutheran Church

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### ***Luke 18:9–14***

*[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man 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.”*

### **It’s a Trap!**

Watch out for the trap! The parable this morning is like a trap. A trap is something that seduces us into believing it is one thing when it is another. A trap surprises us. We don’t know we are trapped until after we are caught. None of us like the idea of being trapped, caught off guard, surprised. The warning on the side of this sermon reads: Reading or hearing this sermon may be dangerous for your life as you know it.” On a surface level, the trap in this sermon is to believe Jesus is teaching a moral principle here about not judging. Don’t be like the Pharisee, be like the tax collector. If you got trapped into this thinking you are normal. This is an obvious conclusion to draw from the story. “Thank God I am not like that Pharisee....” or maybe I am.

The Pharisee and the sinner are in the Temple. The Temple is the place God resided in the Holy of Holies. The Pharisee is reciting the liturgical prayer of thanksgiving like we say the “Our Father...” By all standards, including our own, the Pharisee is a good and religious man giving ten percent off the top for everything including food and animals, fasting twice a week when once is required. It was not easy being religious under the Roman occupation. Jesus calls the Pharisees, lovers of money, hypocrites, and adulterers. The name means “separate ones”.

Part of the trap in this story is surmising all Pharisees are alike. The one in this story portrays one individual Pharisee. The person hearing this story from the lips of Jesus would expect the Pharisee to pray what he prayed. They would have never expected, or even suspected a tax collector of going to the Temple to pray. You would never be embarrassed to have a Pharisee in your home, work, or family. As a matter of fact, you would probably be proud. Now how do we handle the criticism of Jesus toward them? Some of my rabbinical friends suspect Jesus was a Pharisee, and his criticism of them is like, “I can criticize my brother.” Jesus is not critical of his prayer, but of him glancing across the pews observing this tax collector looking down and beating his breast like a woman. What is he doing here? He stopped praying and started observing. His gratitude shifted to observing the tax collector.

The tax collector is sitting in the back pew, looking down, and beating his chest. This is all we know. There is temptation to conjecture all kinds of story about him being a drunk, a womanizer, a crook, and the list goes on, spicing up our imagination. Tax collectors were tough, their job was to get the taxes for the Roman government. We know they were considered outsiders, sinners, and unclean. They represented the bottom of the social strata. They would be our modern "Pay Day Loan Centers." You wouldn't encourage your son or daughter to be a tax collector, yet the first disciple Jesus called to follow him was Matthew, the tax collector. Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners.

### **Justified**

Wait, this is a trap. Isn't the purpose of Christianity about us being good, moral, upstanding people like the Pharisee's? Didn't Jesus come to give us a model to follow? Getting out of this trap can be a problem. What do we do with the conclusion of the man (the tax collector) went home justified rather than the other (the Pharisee)? The trap...

Most of us probably, and for good reasons, prefer the life of the Pharisee over the life of the tax collector. How often are our prayers of gratitude for our own health, education, country, jobs, families, homes, food, shelter...I doubt any of you sitting here this morning are lacking in gratitude to God. Sometimes you might glance across the pew and say to yourself, "except for the grace of God, I would be sitting there." But at end of the day, the night, how often do we catch ourselves pounding on our chest, table, door, or wall reviewing the week? How often do we say to ourselves, "If only I had \_\_\_\_\_ I would be \_\_\_\_\_?" I suspect we are trapped when we hear the words of Jesus as, "be humble like the tax collector and not exalted like the Pharisee." But I suspect most of us are sitting in the pew between the two. Struggling to be better, live better, and act better. And having trouble acknowledging we probably don't like the tax collectors sitting in the other pew because they reflect the dirt and stain making us uncomfortable. At the end of the day, we vow to work harder, do better, and try to improve.

This is a formula for disaster. The Catch-22 list of things you shoulda, gotta, and havta do. There is nothing wrong with improving ones vocation, health, family, and relationships - until it possesses us. Comparisons are a seductive trap where the demons can have a field day with our spirit, and win, inflating us when we are on top and kicking us when we are at the bottom.

### **Escaping the Trap**

Getting out of this trap begins with some questions. What made the tax collector right with God when he left? What makes us right with God when we walk out of this sanctuary and go home. What makes us one with God - the experience we all want? Let us begin with what doesn't make us right. Jesus wasn't preaching to the tax collectors in this section. Those who were the outsiders would not be the listeners. We fall into a trap if we conclude that self-denigrating behavior is the kind of prayer God rewards. You reach a point you need to claim the forgiveness of God, and trust you are forgiven. We can't do this as a Pharisee, but neither can we do it if we are trapped in thinking we are unforgivable. It is a trap and a game to play mea culpa. This is not about humility and pride.

Secondly, it is not about getting the goodies after confession and absolution. This makes the Grace of God conditional upon our confession, and makes God powerless until we confess. Confession brings us into awareness of what God is already doing in your life, raising you up to a new life. In our story, the Pharisee confesses, asks for nothing, and goes home with nothing. The tax collector asks for mercy, and goes home with being made right with God.

### **Look Closely**

Hopefully you feel as if you are getting out of this trap. In the process of getting out of this trap you can look over the pews and see those who are struggling with opens hands, pounding their chest, and opening their hearts as a doorway to knowing the grace of God in your life. You can look at the one pounding their chest, saying, "I screwed up" as brothers and sisters in Christ as opposed to just being screwed up people.

I suppose we can all look at Lindsay Lohan (and the others like her) as a modern tax collector. She is screwed up. A talented, beautiful, gifted young lady who is addicted. Not only addicted, but apprehended by the law several times. Gone to rehab, jail, back to rehab, and now on the way to jail again where Judge Fox was probably going to send her. Something happened, she didn't get an out jail card, she got a back to rehab card. I suppose this Judge Fox believes more in Lohan than she believes in herself.

A rehab center is like the Holy Sprit at work in your life this morning. Rehabilitation is about facing the truth in your life, about surrendering, about trusting, knowing you need help, about raising you to new life. Jail would be the, "do it yourself program" for this young lady. Self Reliance is a jail sentence for most of you and you will never get out. Sin is a powerful drug that none of us are immune to. Sin is not the last word. The last word is life, new life. This is the new life you experience when God empowers you to go and put yours arm the one in the last pew. This is new life when the Holy Spirit moves you from arrogance to compassion. God is acting in your life through this story, liberating you and bringing you home.

Your life isn't over when you come to the end of your options. It is a beginning, a new beginning, as you come to God this morning with opens hands and open heart. Most of you this morning are probably sitting in pew between the two. You can stop pounding on your chest and pretending all is well. Opening your heart and hands delivers you from having to hold it all together, and opens your eyes to seeing the presence of God in your life. With open hands and open heart you will leave today right with God, because you are given the ability to receive His love. You know this love as it transforms you in how you see others.