

XI

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

—LUKE 18:9-14

This parable is so simple and seems to have about it so much of the quality of being beautifully self-evident possessed by things with which we have been familiar from our youth that we hesitate to waste another word upon it. Why should we as adults dissect and analyze and mull over what a child understands? Ought we not simply to let the parable stand in its monumental simplicity and merely salute it reverently, as one would an old acquaintance whom we had looked up to even as boys and girls, one of the few things in our life which even now that we have grown older and more skeptical has lost none of its grandeur, its splendor, and the freshness of eternal youth.

But often we miss the inner mysteries of the very things with which we are most familiar simply because we are too familiar with them. And this may well be true of this parable.

The two figures whom our Lord portrays with such quiet simplicity have long since become oversimplified and debased into stereotypes in our imagination and now we can hardly recognize their original features. We are always likely to think that this is rather stark black-and-white portraiture.

Of course, if the Pharisee were actually the vain popinjay who is

always exulting in his own splendor with bumptious passion, who never lets a conversation or even a prayer go by without allowing, covertly or openly, all his points of excellence to shine like jewels, and laps up with voluptuous pleasure every bit of admiration that comes his way—if the Pharisee were really a sheer coxcomb, then, of course, the parable would have a point so self-evident as to be downright banal. But this is precisely what the Pharisee is not.

And if the publican were really so touchingly and sentimentally humble as he appears in our imagination, then again the parable would hold no problems. But the publican was not like that at all. On the contrary, he was probably a rather tough fellow who had entered the service of the occupying power and fleeced his own people for the benefit of his own pocket, what we would call a *collaborator*.

On the other hand, the Pharisee is a man who is in dead earnest about his service to God. After all, we can tell at once whether a person's heart is in a thing when it touches his stomach or his pocket-book. Business is business, and for many people this is where sentiment and Christianity, too, stop. But not with the Pharisee! He fasted and sacrificed and thus cut down his standard of living for God. So for him God was at least as real as the jingling coins in his purse.

This really should not be overlooked. And if we do not disregard it, we begin to understand that the Pharisee is a highly respected man. The people sense that he is not merely uttering empty words, that he is not one who would say, "We commend the offering plates in the narthex to your charity," and then collect it for himself, as the publican might do, but that he himself is the first to give. People have a fine instinct for a man's sincerity. And while the publican exerts only a corrupting influence upon the community, the Pharisee works faithfully and sacrificially to preserve its holy traditions and its faith. The community senses that the ultimate foundations of its life are in good hands as long as he stands for what he does.

When we see all this clearly it is no longer quite so self-evident that Jesus should proceed to praise the publican and condemn the Pharisee. We may well suppose that he did not depreciate a respected and in many ways venerable figure without great sadness of heart. Manifestly everything looks quite different in God's eyes from what it does in man's.

But this is easily said and yet is full of difficult and burdensome questions. Is the judgment of men, even of very earnest and morally mature men, of no value at all? Is the opposite of man's judgment always the only right one in God's eyes? Can we never trust our own intellect and are ordinary people never to depend upon their instinct at all? Does God always turn our values upside down, does he always run a red line through our systems of value? Doesn't God, and here his Son, have any appreciation whatsoever of the fact that the publican is a rascal

and the Pharisee is a very serious man and therefore a man who should be taken seriously? It is not a matter to be taken lightly that God should always be of a different mind from men, even from very serious-minded and wise men. What kind of strange God is this, who accepts the publican and rejects the Pharisee?

We shall try to understand this God who acts and thinks so strangely and then attempt to look at these two figures as they appear to God's eyes.

We can do this, of course, only with a profound sense of dismay, for both figures are a part of ourselves. How many there are among us who have accomplished something in life, who in their business are mentioned with respect as employers or as employees, who have dealt honestly when it would have been easier to be an opportunist! Will they, too, cut a woeful figure before the Last Judgment and be condemned? And, after all, everything depends on whether they can stand *that* test.

But perhaps there are also among us some who are heavily burdened in conscience. Perhaps they have not been able to control their urges and desires; perhaps they have made another person unhappy; perhaps they have been tricky when everything depended upon being straight; perhaps they are unbearably vain or are consumed with ambition. They are disgusted with themselves but cannot cope with it. Must such a person go away judged and condemned, having had knocked out of him all the self-confidence he had this morning when he left home a respectable and somewhat saturated Christian church member? Or may he be assured that God accepts the sorrow and shame he feels concerning himself, which at times may lead him to the brink of suicide, and that God does not reject him, but, just because he is sorrowful and ashamed, loves him and welcomes him?

But there is one thing that will not do, and that is for him to assume a kind of publican's pride and make a soft cushion of the kindness of God with which he heals and comforts the terrified conscience of a sinner; to make himself out to be utterly vile and tear himself down; to be constantly babbling of his sins and shortcomings—as many pious people do, thinking that this will impress God and thus abate his desire to judge them.

There is such a thing as confessing one's faults and blackening oneself, which is merely a trick. This is always the case when people try to make an accomplishment of their humility. Then the beating of one's breast is nothing less than an elaborate form of coquetry. This is only smacking one's lips with pleasure over the thought of the delight that God must derive from such a smitten conscience and such self-abasement. But when this happens a man does not have a smitten conscience at all; the devil has snared him with publican's pride.

Many of us are less like the Pharisee, with his uplifted head and his

solid moral character, than we are like the publican—but a somewhat different publican from the one described in the parable. Perhaps like a publican who says, “I thank thee, God, that I am not so proud as this Pharisee; I am an extortioner, unjust, and an adulterer. That’s the way human beings are, and that’s what I am, but at least I admit it, and therefore I am a little bit better than the rest of the breed. I commit fornication twice a week, and at most ten per cent of what I own comes from honest work. I am an honest man, O God, because I don’t kid myself, I don’t have any illusions about myself. Let your angels sing a hallelujah over this one sinner who is as honest as I am, honest enough to admit that he is a dirty dog and not hide it beneath his robes like these lying Philistines the Pharisees.”

This publican’s pride, in which God has no pleasure at all, is really epidemic among the pious. How many people of the world have timidly begun to ask whether Christ was not the right Man for them and then became disgusted with faith because they became convinced that this coquettish humility was far more indecent than their high-minded and proud striving for ideals.

But I mention this not merely to pronounce a judgment upon ourselves as a Christian church but above all because here is a basic truth of our faith. And that truth is this: Whether one is a publican or a Pharisee, whether one is loved or rejected by God, does not depend on particular qualities, nor does it depend on whether one is outwardly humble or not, whether one has illusions about oneself or whether one is honest. In other words, everything one does and thinks can be used by the devil; he can use even the holiest waters to drive his mills. One can play the deuce even with divine forgiveness and make it a pretext for evil. For example, if one is a theologian—and why should I spare my own “trade” here?—one can be an unjustified, case-hardened Pharisee and champion what may be a correct and legitimate doctrine of justification with an angry, arrogant fanaticism for orthodoxy. One can preach and teach the love of God in such a way as to despise those who do not yet understand it or only half understand it. This disease of publican’s pride is particularly rampant among us theologians and ministers. Not infrequently when we speak and write about the love of God we are more dogmatical and disputatious than loving witnesses to justification.

So we must be especially careful of the devout moments in our life. No confession of sin safeguards us against pride. Even humility is not a virtue which is immune to the devil. On the contrary, these are the very nests in which he loves to lay the cuckoo eggs of pride; he is pleased as Punch when the pious hatch them out.

Thus we face the question: Where, then, is the real difference between these two figures, if the publican can be proud and the Pharisee

can be humble, if it is obvious that everything is relative, if God can dwell with the rascal and the devil can lodge in the skin of the pious?

Let us therefore take a closer look at the scene presented to us in the parable.

To begin with, there are many parallels between these two men.

Both want to stand before God; they seek his fellowship; they are both in the temple. They are not simply seeking God in nature. The people who do this are mostly seeking only a religious thrill but otherwise they want to remain what they are. In other words, the God of nature does nothing to them. He does not judge them, he gives them no commands; they do not have to die for him, they need only to enjoy him. In his sublimity the nature-god is also above and beyond our private life.

But both of the figures in our parable want more than this and they do more than this: they enter into the holy presence of God. They expose themselves to his will, his claim. They are not trying to escape into cheap non-commitment, but rather take their stand before God. This is in itself no inconsiderable thing.

But their worship of God indicates that they have something even deeper in common: both of them approach God with a prayer of thanks. The *publican*, even though his prayer is expressed in the form of a petition, gives thanks that there is such a thing as the mercy of God, that even someone like himself can approach him, that even an unworthy man can enter the sanctuary and need not go shuffling about outside, sick for home and crying for paradise lost. The *Pharisee* too gives thanks to God. What does he actually thank him for? He gives thanks that God's Spirit has performed a great work in his life, that God's great act of liberation has freed him from the chains of greed and selfishness and made him worthy to approach the kingdom of God with head held high. He does not simply say, "God, look what a fine fellow I am; you must really be gratified with me." To speak of the Pharisee in this way would be a malicious caricature. Even if he did consider himself a fine fellow he nevertheless thanks God for having made him one. So the Pharisee too gives praise to the mercy of God. What could one say against that?

Thus the very fact that both of them approach God with a prayer of thanksgiving shows that they have penetrated deeply into the mysteries of God. Beginners and casual Christians usually confine themselves to petitions, especially when they are in trouble. But in the very next moment they have forgotten God; it was only a passing panic that exploded into prayer. When a person gives thanks to God he always shows that he is not merely concerned with momentary help and using God as a means to an end, but rather with God himself, with fellowship with God and his peace. But why, then, is the publican's prayer of thanksgiving accepted and that of the Pharisee rejected? There must

be something wrong with the Pharisee's thanksgiving. We must dig still deeper to find the critical point in the Pharisee and—in ourselves.

Both of these men in the temple are performing an act of self-knowing; both acknowledge and confess something about themselves. The publican confesses that he cannot stand before God with his burdened conscience. And in this he is certainly right. The Pharisee thinks that he *can* stand before God. And the fact is that he actually is made of different stuff from that dubious fellow standing over by the column. Shouldn't he also be able to say so openly? Wouldn't it be hypocrisy, humility carried too far, for him to level all differences abstractly and dogmatically and simply declare: Before God we are both alike? The Pharisee would passionately reject such egalitarianism. Not only because it would go against his honor personally but above all because he would see in it an attack upon the commandments of God.

What he would say to himself would be this: Either the holy commandments of God stand for something, and then it is not a matter of indifference whether a man fulfills them as scrupulously as I do or plays hob with them as does this publican. Or the commandments of God are not meant seriously, and then this rotten publican is O.K. But then all self-discipline, all sacrifice, all moral effort would suddenly be devaluated, then the garbage would be put on top of the heap, then all my endeavors would count for nothing and suddenly I would be put on the same level with every thief and rogue. But this surely cannot be the will of God. This would make mockery of God's holy will and his commandments. Not because of my personal honor and respectability, no, but because of the honor of God there can be no fellowship and no equality with the publican.

Isn't what the Pharisee thinks as he prays to be taken very seriously? Isn't it true that what he is concerned about is God's honor—especially since he does not ascribe to himself the decisive merits at all, but rather ascribes them to the divine grace, which has preserved, saved, and strengthened him, and which he therefore praises?

We see that this story has its depths. It is not at all a simple thing to understand the judgment Jesus makes. So the best thing to do is to ask how these two men arrived at their self-knowledge and their different confessions. And the fact is that this is where we hit upon the salient point.

If you want to know yourself, you must have a standard. And when this standard is applied the differences between the two figures become apparent.

The Pharisee measures himself by looking downward when he tries to determine his rank before God. He chooses the bad publican as a standard. Then, of course, the differences become quite drastically obvious. Sure, the Pharisee knows he has faults, he knows the wolves that howl in the cellar of his soul, the thoughts and desires that frighten

him. But he has controlled them. The publican, however, has exercised no inhibitions or discipline and has allowed himself to be driven by these wolves.

True as all this may be—and it is actually true!—this kind of self-measurement by looking downward always produces pride. This can be illustrated by the desire to gossip. Why is it that when we are together we take such pleasure in sinking our teeth into our fellow men, why do men delight in doing this around the lunch table and women when they are at a tea party? Where is the root of this strange delight (which sometimes actually becomes a sensual pleasure) that we take in discussing in whispers and feigned horror the private weaknesses and perhaps the secret amours of prominent people in the world? Quite simply because at such moments we feel so much better about ourselves and because we can say with indescribable moral relish, “Such things don’t occur in my life.” Or at least, “Such things may occur in my life but they certainly should not happen to a public figure or his wife.” Gossip—including the gossip that spills out of the *exposé* literature in our picture magazines and cheap papers—is always based upon a kind of self-defense mechanism. We want our own superiority to be confirmed and we achieve this by being horrified at others and putting ourselves above them. Anybody who looks downward and measures himself by the weaknesses of his fellow men immediately becomes proud; or, better, what he is concerned about is not primarily to run down others but rather by running down others to make himself look good and feel good.

We encounter here a secret which operates not merely in the private life of the individual but also in public life and politics. There are politicians of such Machiavellian unscrupulousness that they simply say, “Politics is always a dirty business and always has been. Ever since the world began power has always triumphed over justice and subsequently justice has had to legalize the power. Since the world is full of wolves, let us run with the wolf pack. Anybody who acts otherwise as a politician will soon be looked upon as a visionary idealist and in no time at all he will be plowed under.” It was not so long ago that such thoughts were openly proclaimed as a party platform in Germany. Today they are cherished more privately. And the world which thus measures and orients itself downward, which takes as its standard the law of the wolf and makes politics “amoral”—the nice scientific term for it—this world then plunges into the anxiety and the megalomania which it itself has spawned.

For this false attitude, for this measuring of oneself by looking downward, the Pharisee is an example. He makes the publican his standard. And this makes everything he says—despite its truth in detail—false and untrue. And then this standard also corrupts the honesty of his prayer of thanksgiving. True, he thanks *God* for having made him

what he is now. He knows very well that this is no merit of *his*, and he says so. But once he has slipped into this wrong way of looking at himself and the publican and allowed the evil passion for making comparisons to get hold of him he suddenly begins to look upon himself with satisfaction and complacency: Sure, this is what God has made of me, but after all this is what *I* am too.

I cannot help thinking of many of the stories of conversion which pious people and also many moral movements love to tell in these days. First they paint a picture of what they were before in the blackest possible colors. They work themselves up to an almost masochistic pitch of self-accusation. Then they tell how they came into contact with the Spirit of God when they met up with a particular group or sect, and now their eyes are enlightened, now they can rejoice all the day, they are liberated children of God.

The fact is that this does actually happen; one *can* have this experience with God. And anybody who has had it will always be grateful to God for it. But the more one talks about it, the more one trumpets abroad these stories of one's experience with God, the more one's attention becomes focused upon oneself, and suddenly the devil has turned the whole thing into a pious and vain autobiography. After all, I must have been pretty good raw material for him to have picked me out the way he did. God must have found something rather special in me; otherwise he wouldn't have entered into my life and given me this privilege above so many others.

Thus the devil again succeeds in laying his cuckoo eggs in a pious nest. When a man has had an experience of God let him beware of telling it to men and making comparisons. The sulphurous stench of hell is as nothing compared with the evil odor emitted by divine grace gone putrid. The grace of God actually can be corrupted by spiritual vanity. And the so-called children of the world are quick to note this and are repelled by it. How many a non-Christian, for whom Christ died just as he died for you and for me, has learned to know the grace of God only in this fetid form that reeks of pride and has turned away in disgust, preferring to stick with his honest nihilism?

In the figure of the Pharisee we are confronted with a shocking exposure of the sin of Christianity, your sin and my sin, the sin of us who have subtly made of our Christianity a sign of virtue and given it the unpleasant smack of privilege. Pharisaic pride is one of the most dreadful and also one of the most infectious diseases of Christianity.

And right here and only at this point is the prayer of the publican different. When a man really turns to God with a burdened conscience he doesn't think of other people at all. There he is utterly alone with God. It would never have occurred to the publican to say, "Sure, this Pharisee is a man of a different stripe from me, but he too has plenty of blots on his scutcheon; he's a sinner too." This would have been true,

of course. But when a man is utterly alone with God and dealing solely with him, then many things that are true are completely immaterial to him. He has something else to think about. And that's why the publican's attitude is completely genuine and radically honest. He measures himself "upward." God *himself* is his standard. And measuring himself by that standard he is suddenly aware of how far removed he is. But then this is just the time when God is very near to him. He does not dare to say, "Dear God," because for him in his sordidness this would be an impermissible familiarity. But then God speaks to him and says, "My beloved child."

We Germans had some conception of our guilt after the collapse at the end of the last war and many of us uttered the prayer of the publican: "God be merciful to me a sinner! Remove not thy grace from our sunken people." But then came one of the most dreadful moments in the spiritual history of our nation when suddenly we began to say, "Others are just as bad as we." Then suddenly our aloneness with God vanished, then repentance and spiritual renewal were gone, then began that fateful measuring of ourselves by looking downward and comparing ourselves with the hypocritical democratic Pharisees among the victors.

There are two points to be considered in closing.

First, we know that even the Apostle Paul occasionally boasted against his opponents (I Cor. 15:10; II Cor. 11:16 ff.). But obviously this was quite different in intention from that of the Pharisee. Paul still remained the great teacher of divine mercy; he boasted of his weakness. The very fact that he calls this boasting foolishness shows clearly that he is not expressing any ultimate value judgments before God and that therefore he immediately indicates that his boast is merely a relative thing and brushes it aside, that this boasting is not something ultimate but merely penultimate and valid only among men. And here Paul gives us an important clue to the understanding of our parable.

That is to say that we would completely misunderstand this story if we were to conclude from it that there should be no distinctions at all between men. It would be grotesque if an employer could not even ask an applicant for a position whether he had experience and could do the job or not, or if in the name of God I were to put a faithful, respected workman on a par with a man with seventeen previous convictions. There must be distinctions of rank on the human level and on this level there must necessarily be distinctions between good and bad. But we must beware of acting as if these human and social distinctions of rank also had validity before that final court where all of us are sinners. No man who goes to the Lord's Table dare be shocked when suddenly he finds the publican with seventeen convictions standing beside him and

drinking from the same cup. On the contrary, he can only praise God for the gracious work he has done for this poor man as well as for himself and he will hear the angels rejoicing over this one sinner in whose heart the joy of forgiveness is beginning to stir.

I once visited a family and when I entered the room the son, the "black sheep" or "prodigal son" of the family, was sitting at the piano playing chorales. He had broken his mother's heart by committing many shameful acts. His playing was deeply moving because he played with so much feeling. It was, I believe, the hymn, "Commit thou all thy griefs and ways into his hands." His sister cast a look of hatred at him and hissed with scorn, "That hypocrite!" This girl who had been the faithful Martha in the home, working while her brother dissipated, might also have said, "God, I thank thee that I am not like this fellow." But was not what she said an evil thing—quite as bad as what the pious Pharisee said? How would *God* look upon this brother? Did God see in him a man who wallowed in evil and selfish pleasures and was now going so far as to exploit a chorale for whatever religious, aesthetic, epicurean kick he could get out of it? Or did God see in him a man whose hours of yearning and of disgust with shame drove him into the temple and who down in his heart was playing the prayer, "God, be merciful to me a sinner"? Who was this man, really? Which was the real man? May he not have been precisely the man who was playing the chorale with such feeling? Was not *this* perhaps the real man coming out; was not *this* the divine original suddenly breaking through the overlay of smut and nastiness—or was the chorale only a piece of sentimental religiosity he used to cover up his black soul? Who of us could ever tell? But to God it was plain.

What do we people really know of each other? What do we know about how you and I will look at the last judgment? What did the Pharisee really know about the publican? We live between the false judgments we make now and the surprises which the Last Judgment will bring.

We should therefore stand in reverence before another person's ultimate secret, the secret he shares only with God, which only his heavenly Father knows. We are all known by these sovereign eyes; but we ourselves know no one. And the miracle that happened to the publican was that he was known and seen through and through by those eyes and yet they did not close in rejection of the darkness in his life but opened and beckoned in compassionate welcome and acceptance. But the point is that the publican looked only into *those* eyes and did not allow himself to be misled into looking at the Pharisee and measuring himself by him.

This brings us to the second and last point.

What was the publican thinking when he went away? Did he perhaps say to himself, "Now I can go on as before; now I can go on

grafting and smuggling, now that I have found out that God doesn't cut a fellow off, that he justifies a man even if he is a rascal"? Or would he not rather have gone away filled with radiant gratitude for this immeasurable goodness and found it simply impossible to give pain to this Father and disappoint him by committing sin?

Perhaps he too became one who a year later could say what the Pharisee was suggesting concerning himself on this day in the temple: "Behold, Lord, I have not committed adultery any more, nor have I gone on enriching myself. I could not have found it in my heart to hurt thee. I thank thee that through thy forgiveness and thy mercy thou hast given me courage and a new chance. I thank thee for thy manifest guidance." Have we caught the very fine differences, the almost imperceptible nuances that distinguish the way the Pharisee prayed from the way in which it is to be hoped that the publican will pray a year hence? An eternal destiny lies in these very small differences. A false, proud look at our neighbor can spoil everything for us and turn the grace of our God into putrefaction.

Perhaps some of you may now ask the question which the disciples once put to their Lord at the close of an hour of earnest teaching: "Who then can be saved if grace can go bad in our hands? Which of us does not repeatedly catch himself casting this prideful look at others?" And in answer to that I can only reply with the answer that Jesus himself gave: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

If we could only learn to come to the end of our pretensions as the publican had come to his. Then God could make a new beginning with us. If only we could learn not to keep pushing ourselves forward and showing off before God. Then he could finally become our Father. And we—well, we could then be new, free persons.