

What Kind of Person Are We?

In case you didn't know it, there are only two kinds of people. We have them both in the first line of our text. There are "some," and there are "others." For example, let's see, there are some who like pepperoni on their pizza, and there are others who prefer Italian sausage. What kind of person are you? Pepperoni? [Wait for hands.] Or, Italian sausage? [hands] There are some who vote Republican ... and there are others who vote Democrat (I won't ask you to raise hands). There are some who sin on a fairly regular basis. And there are others who...what? Don't sin on a fairly regular basis? Don't think they sin on a fairly regular basis? Don't really understand what sin is? What kind of person are you? [Hands]

In case you're interested, sin is defined broadly in my Bible dictionary as "a reality signifying the broken relationship between God and humanity." Notice it didn't say "a broken relationship," but "the broken relationship." Implying that the broken relationship already exists, that sin is a universal condition, and that pretty much everyone has a broken relationship with God. Do you think that's fair? Do you have a broken relationship with God?

I'll come back to that, but returning to my Bible dictionary, sin is defined more specifically in the following ways: in its verbal sense, "to miss a goal or way"; to commit "an offense toward God"; and in its nominative sense, as "guilt"; "transgression"; "rebellion"; "revolt." In the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, we usually say, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," but we can alternatively say "Forgive us our debt," or "Forgive us our trespass." Clearly there are many ways to nuance what it means to sin, and what a sin is.

There are two kinds of people. There are Pharisees, and there are Tax Collectors. Which kind are you?

Let's review what we know about both kinds. A Pharisee was a member of a group in first century Judaism that focused on following every jot and tittle of the Torah, including fasting and paying the tithe. They tend to get a lot of grief in the gospels, but it was not a bad thing per se to be a Pharisee. They were trying really hard to be righteous, to be in right relationship with God, to live the right way.

A Tax Collector was a first century Jew who worked in collusion with the Roman government by collecting all manner of revenue for that government, even when it was unjust to do so, because of which they were despised by their fellow Jews, considered unclean according to the Torah, and therefore (by definition) in wrong relationship with God. It was generally not a good thing to be a Tax Collector.

So in Jesus' parable, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector went up to the temple to pray. Clearly, both are Jews; both make use of the temple in Jerusalem as a place to "get right with God." The Pharisee appears to assume that he already is right with God. And, with good reason. He's meticulously and rigorously following the Torah, far more than the average Jew. He even follows that most pious Jewish practice of thanking God for his righteousness, rather than claiming credit for it himself. First century Jews would not have thought he was boasting about how righteous he is.

But I wonder what God thought. I suspect there are a lot of prayers that just make God groan in a combination of disbelief and disgust. This Pharisee might have started out safely enough—he could very well have been sincerely grateful when he thanked God for keeping him from becoming a thief, rogue, or adulterer. (Which, by the way, is quite a comprehensive list, covering sins of greed, violence, and sex—which some consider the worst sin of all.) Except did

the Pharisee have to say, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people?” Which is clearly comparing himself to others, and sounds very much as if he thinks he is superior—that others are more sinful than he is. That was surely a groaner for God. And when the Pharisee added “or even like this tax collector,” the groan just might have been audible from heaven. Which if put into words would mean “I can’t believe you just said that!”

What kind of person are you? The kind whose prayers sometimes cause God to groan?
[Hands]

And then there is the Tax Collector. Who in Jesus’s highly dramatic and descriptive parable feels so guilty about his sins that he cannot even lift his eyes to heaven. Granted, most of Jesus’ listeners that day would have thought the Tax Collector deserved to feel guilty. The things he did were reprehensible, disgusting. And yes, he should have been beating on his breast, which in Jewish culture was a sign of great mourning or repentance for sin.

But the most shocking part of the parable was the end, where Jesus says that it was the Tax Collector who went home justified, and not the Pharisee. To be justified, by the way, meant to be set right with God—to be forgiven by God. Which had to have felt like a huge weight off his shoulders. Especially given the gravity of his sin. (Did Josh look justified this morning in the dramatization? We rehearsed that!) It feels so good to be forgiven that the Apostle Paul was worried we might want to sin even more, so we can be forgiven even more. A possibility, by the way, that Paul emphatically ruled out.

It might feel good to be forgiven, but rest assured: when one first becomes convicted of one’s sin, it doesn’t feel good. You don’t want to feel that way. You don’t want to feel unworthy to lift your eyes up to God. You don’t want to beat your own breasts out of guilt and shame. (I’ve been there. I’m that kind of person sometimes.) But the point of this parable is neither how bad it feels to be convicted of one’s sin, nor how good it feels to be forgiven, but rather that forgiveness is always available whenever one sincerely asks for it. No matter how grievous the sin.

So what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sincerely, if also frequently, asks for forgiveness? Or are you the kind that doesn’t always know when you need it? Are you the kind that, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, trusts in yourself that you have this righteousness thing down pat? Or, like the Tax Collector, do you not trust yourself, because you know you don’t have it down?

Jesus reminds us how shocking grace is when he turns it on its head and says that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Of course, there is a danger here, namely that we will work so hard to be humble that we become proud of our humility. In which case our prayer to God might sound like this: “God, I thank you that I am the most humble person I know. Or at least, I’m more humble than that self-righteous Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, or that arrogant so-and-so I live next door to.

What kind of person are we? I’ll speak for myself. Unfortunately, I am the kind that sins. The kind whose actions and words often cause God to groan. Sometimes audibly. But thanks be to God for reminding us this morning that forgiveness is always available when we both ask for it, and know that we need it.

Amen. (That is, until next time...when we will need forgiveness all over again!)