

Those Other People
Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

God, I thank you that I'm not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector. They are terrible people. But I am extra holy. I fast twice a week even though nowhere in Scripture is there such a requirement. I give a tenth of everything that comes in my house, and I'll just note that is way above and beyond giving a tenth of just what I earn. Those other people steal and cheat and collude with the Romans in order to line their own pockets.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those people who don't put their basket away in the HEB parking lot. They're selfish and rude and don't care about other people's cars. I am so extra good that I take it all the way back inside the store.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people who have fancy phones but then have to go to the food bank to feed their families. Their priorities are all messed up and they just make excuses. I would never spend an extra penny on anything frivolous or to make my life easier.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those rich people who spend more money before breakfast than I've made my whole life. They don't care about anyone but themselves and they for sure don't give a tenth of their income to the church.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those cosmopolitan people who live in cities. They're always fighting and committing crimes. So much traffic makes them cranky, and they don't understand us out here in the country. They don't even want to. I would never be a city dweller.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those provincial people that live in small towns. Don't they understand how many more opportunities for their children and jobs and culture and art there is available in a city? They're so backwards and isolated. I could never live in the country.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those conservatives. They constantly are looking out for number one and disregarding that other people aren't like them. They keep hanging on to the way things used to be and can't see the changes that are happening right in front of their eyes.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those liberals. They don't care about history or tradition or values. They just want to change things

faster than I can keep up with, and those changes don't make any sense and are a big mistake.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those people that send their kids to private school. Don't they care about the public good? How do they think their kids are going to cope in the real world?

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, those people that don't even investigate schools and just send their kids to the closest public school. Their kids could get a better and safer education somewhere else, and they'd be set up for much better success.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people, people like that Pharisee who judge everyone around them and puffed up their own good qualities at the expense of everyone else. They're so focused on doing the right things that they can't even see the pain of the world around them.

God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people.

I could keep going for quite a while. We're really good at judging whole groups of "other people." We're really good at making separations between groups of people and pretending that we fall on the "good person" side of a difference, as if there's always a moral dimension to every difference. Sometimes people are just different.

The Pharisee is a caricature. If the Pharisee isn't exaggerating, he's ridiculously pious, going above and beyond every commandment he can find. Pharisees *were* uncommonly religious and careful about their religious practice and belief. His error is not in practice or belief, but in his judgment of others.

The tax collector is also a caricature. There's no question that tax collectors were despised. First they paid the tax bill to the Roman hierarchy. Then they went about town and countryside and city collecting the taxes. So it was to their immense benefit to collect more from their community than they had already paid on behalf of their community. That's how they made money. Not a particularly honorable line of work, and nobody liked them being in cahoots with the Romans. This despised tax collector prays the simplest of prayers. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" There's no promise to stop being a tax collector. There's no promise like Zacchaeus made to pay restitution to those he had cheated. There's not really repentance or any expressed intention to do better next time. Just begging for God's mercy.

The parable is clear that the tax collector got that mercy. He left the Temple justified, made right with God. This is simply just not fair. He's objectively a terrible person, one of "those people." And he didn't even say he was sorry. He

wants God's mercy without doing any work on himself.

Do you remember when we did that study about parables several years ago? This is not one that we studied, but it's in the book we were working from. That author, Amy-Jill Levine, believes that a crucial preposition has been mis translated in verse 14. Our translation says that the tax collector went home "justified *rather* than the other." That *rather* is the preposition "para" in Greek, which comes over to English pretty much intact. So words like parallel—lines that run alongside each other. Paralegal—one who works alongside lawyers. Paragraph—sentences that come together to make an idea. None of those are "rather than."

So, Levine suggests, that verse would read like this: the tax collector went home justified *alongside* the Pharisee; not *rather* than the Pharisee. Well, that's not fair either. The Pharisee was being all judgy and self righteous. He didn't even ask for God's mercy at all!

God's grace is unfair. The absurdly deserving and the ridiculously undeserving both get it. The prodigal son and the older brother both are welcome in the father's house. Anyone we can describe as "those other people" receive God's mercy. We receive God's mercy. There's no difference between us and "those other people." We all need God's mercy. None of us deserve God's mercy. And yet we receive grace upon grace. Thanks be to God.