

Luke 18:9-14
Jesus is not very religious
Tim Anderson 11/6/17

I've been enjoying preaching
this 'Jesus is not very Christian' sermon series.
The slightly challenging nature of the titles
has helped to underline
the challenging nature of Jesus' life and teaching.
But today we strike a title
which would elicit a shrug and a 'yeah so what'
from many people.
And a confusion from many others.
The world is changing.
And many of us struggle with how fast it is changing.
And one of the little things that has changed
amongst many far larger things that have also changed,
is the way people use the word 'religious'.
Today most people use 'religious'
as a word with strong negative associations.
If someone calls you 'religious', that's not a compliment usually.
In fact many ministers of churches use the word 'religious'
to describe what they are not.
Which is much to the bewilderment of those
who think that religious is what a minister is by definition.
For once the Bible doesn't help clarify matters.
Because in the Bible
there are descriptions of empty religion and false religion
and there are also descriptions of true religion.
And it's not clear if you say that you are religious
which sort of religious you mean.

So how did we get to this point where people heard the word religious
and understood it to mean such different things?
Well part of the question would be what you see it's opposite as.
What is the opposite of religious?

Many people with a more traditional mindset,
or with a belief in the rationality of the English language
would say that the opposite of religious is irreligious.
And who is a person who is irreligious?
It's a person who has a heart hardened against God.
It's a person who doesn't care what God thinks of their life.
It's someone who is happy to trample over other people
because they don't fear God's judgement.
Irreligious is Chairman Mao or Pol Pot,
Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens.
So when you are contrasting religious with irreligious,
then it's easy to see why someone might be happy
to be described as religious.
Religious then means God fearing.
Someone who knows they will give account to God for their life
and so takes care to love God and their neighbour.
What could be more appropriate than that?

But these days, that understanding of religious is disappearing.
And there's another contrast to religious
that is defining what 'religious' means.
Now days, people would see the opposite of religious as being spiritual.
A religious person is into the outward forms of religious practice.
Things like going to church.
A spiritual person is into getting their heart in tune with God
or the universe or whatever higher power they believe in.
The spiritual person doesn't need the props
to validate their experience of God.
They can do without bread and wine or stained glass windows.
And the spiritual person has a distrust of religious authority -
it doesn't matter
whether that authority comes in the form of a book or a person.
They don't like being told what to do or what to believe.
They like to work it out themselves.
They call that being true to themselves.

So many people today see 'spiritual' as being good
and 'religious' as being inauthentic, old school and self righteous.

If you told someone with that view of religious,
that Jesus was not very religious,
they would say,

"Of course he wasn't.

Jesus was spiritual.

It was only the religious people who followed him
who set up the church,
and made up a whole lot of rules.

But Jesus himself was spiritual.

We like Jesus, we just don't like the church."

Well I wonder if we can discern anything about Jesus' attitude
from the parable today.

The first thing to notice is who the parable was addressed to.

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness
and looked down on everyone else,
Jesus told this parable."

Like the parable of the prodigal son we looked at last week,
it was told with the self righteous in mind.

Last week Jesus was telling the Pharisees
they shouldn't have been complaining
about him welcoming tax collectors and sinners.

This week it's a similar audience.

People who were looking down their noses at others.

People we were confident that they had got it all together.

Jesus is just not into people being confident of their standing before God
based on the quality of their life.

That's what the Pharisee in this parable is like.

He goes up to the temple to pray.

And our Bible says he stood by himself and prayed.

The best information I can dig up,
suggests that a better way to read that would be,

"He stood and prayed to himself."

That is, as much as his prayer was addressed to God,
he was really talking to himself.

He was having a happy little conversation with himself
about how good he was.

And God was just invited along for the ride
to listen in on his self congratulation if he wanted to.

Listen to his 'prayer'.

"God, I thank you
that I am not like other people -
robbers, evildoers, adulterers -
or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week
and I give a tenth of all I get."

Apart from addressing it to God at the start,
there's not much of a God focus in this prayer.

He says 'I' five times in two sentences.

He doesn't ask God to do anything.

He doesn't praise God for anything that God has done,
apart from making him such an excellent bloke.

He sounds to me more like a politician on the hustings.

And when he's congratulating himself -

I mean let's not call it praying -

let's call it what it really is, self congratulation -

When he's congratulating himself,

what does he see as praise worthy?

It's his fasting and his tithing.

It's the outward forms of being religious.

fasting and tithing were what religious people did in those days.

This man is a religious person.

He's got all the outward signs of attention to religious detail.

But can you see that it's nothing about the heart?

He doesn't say to God,

"Thank you for transforming my heart to make me generous."

It's only "I tithe".

Did he tithe because he was generous?

Not likely.

He tithed because he was earning religious brownie points.

And he wanted to know

that he had more religious brownie points than the next person.

He doesn't say to God,

"That you for taking away my self-indulgence

so I could focus my energies on serving you."

It's only, "I fast twice a week."

Mondays and Thursdays were the usual days that religious Jews who were striving for exemplary religiosity fasted.

This guy was one of those.

But did he fast because he wanted to keep his carnal desires in check so he could serve God?

Not likely.

He was just earning religious brownie points.

In fact the Pharisee in the parable is everything

a 'spiritual' person today would react to about organised religion.

He's into the outward forms of religion,

but it's not changing his heart.

He has a self righteous, holier than thou attitude towards others.

He's seeking the approval of people

by being involved in organised religion.

There's no evidence he has any genuine relationship with God.

So the spiritual person would agree with Jesus' assessment.

This man did not go home justified before God.

Jesus is not very religious.

In particular when being religious means that you look down on others, Jesus won't tolerate it.

And when being religious makes you confident that you are good enough for God

Jesus has got bad news for you.

Only the humble will be heard by God.

Which leads us on to the tax collector.
The tax collector was humble.
You can see his humility in many ways.
He stood at a distance.
That means he didn't go to the central part of the temple
where the important people prayed.
He hung back.
If you were to picture it here at Hastings,
it's like he was sitting out in the hall.
And that's important in the Jewish temple,
because it became increasingly holy
the closer you approached the tabernacle.
So there was the most holy place right in the middle.
The high priest could only go there once a year.
Then around that there was the place where only priests could go.
Then around that there was the place where only Jewish men could go.
Then around that was the place where women and foreigners could go.
The closer you got to the middle,
the closer you were to God.
But this tax collector knew he wasn't worthy to come close to God,
so he stood at a distance.
And when he prayed, he wouldn't look up to heaven.
He was ashamed of his life.
He couldn't look God in the eye.
People used to look to heaven when they prayed.
Made sense.
If God's up there,
you might as well look at him when you are addressing him.
But this man knew he wasn't worthy.
So he looked at the floor,
like a school boy in the principal's office.
And he beat his breast.
Again not something we would do,
but the meaning is pretty clear.
It's a sign of deep unworthiness.
He prayed at a distance,

he wouldn't look to heaven,
he beat his breast.
They are all signs of humility.
And they are not outward forms.
No one told him that the way to show you are humble
is by praying at the back of the temple.
No. It came from his heart.
His heart told him he wasn't worthy.
And he just instinctively did the things that he thought were appropriate.

And what did he say?
"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
Notice that unlike the Pharisee,
he doesn't just tack God's name on at the front of the prayer
and then start talking about himself.
He's actually talking to God.
There's a radical thought for you.
In his prayer, he's talking to God.
God, have mercy on me.
Who does he want to have mercy?
He wants God to have mercy.
He wants God to be the active one.
He wants God to do something.
So this is a real prayer.
What does he want God to do?
Have mercy.
Now there's no way you could notice this.
But we have a very unusual word for mercy in the Greek here.
The usual word for mercy
means to take pity on someone's desperate situation.
That's the word that the NT uses the vast majority of the time
when we read mercy.
But in this case, we have another word.
It's only used here and there is a related word in Romans 3.
Now this word for mercy means 'turn your anger away from me'.
Have mercy on me - 'turn your anger away from me'.

So even in using this very unusual word for mercy,
the tax collector was being humble.

He was acknowledging
that God had genuine reason to be angry with him.
He's saying, "You have reason to be mad at me,
but please God, be merciful anyway.
Don't give me the punishment I deserve."

It's worth pausing for a moment
to notice the other time this word is used.

It's in Romans 3:25.

God presented Christ as a 'sacrifice of atonement'.

There's a single Greek word for the phrase 'sacrifice of atonement'.

And it's related to the word for mercy here.

It's speaking of a sacrifice that turns away God's anger at sin.

The blood of Christ turned away God's anger at our sin.

The mercy that the tax collector is asking for,
is that same mercy.

God's anger at sin turned away.

The word actually comes from the 'mercy seat'
on the ark in the tabernacle.

The place where the blood of sacrifices was poured out
so that God's anger at his people's sin would be turned away.

God's wrath appeased.

That's what the tax collector is pleading for.

He's knows he's not worthy.

But he's placing his trust in a forgiving God.

And Jesus says,

"This man went home justified before God."

Well how would this all compute for the 'spiritual' person.

They agree with Jesus' verdict about the Pharisee.

There's nothing from the heart in his religion.

But what about the tax collector?

Well the tax collector is relating to God from the heart -
and the spiritual person can see that's how things should be.
But, he's come to the temple to do it.
He's not rejected organised religion.
He just recognises that it must be practiced
with a heart of true humility before God.
The tax collector is accepting God's authority over him.
He craves forgiveness because he has broken God's law.
The spiritual person is going to have some problems with that.
They don't like authority,
They don't like being told how they must live.
But the tax collector accepts that God tells him how he must live,
and he accepts that he hasn't measured up.
There is actually pride that lies behind the new spiritualities.
Pride that says 'I can choose my own adventure.
I can reject organised religion
because I will decide for myself what is best.'
The 'spiritual' person can end up
being just as self referential as the Pharisee.
"God I thank you that I am not like other people -
judgemental bigots like those church goers over there."
And even if it's not done with attitude,
there's still an arrogance in telling God
you are going to decide for yourself what's right and wrong.
Just as an aside -
it's most likely that is what is meant
by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis.
Adam and Eve were not to eat of that tree.
The tree whose fruit is to decide for yourself what is right and wrong,
instead of listening to God about what is right and wrong.
God made us and he wrote the manual.
It's just as possible to exalt yourself
outside of organised religion as inside it.
And Jesus said,
"All those who exalt themselves will be humbled."

So what can we say about Jesus' attitude?
It's true Jesus is not very religious
in terms of valuing forms above the heart.
If your heart is not in the right place,
Jesus says that it's all meaningless.
But Jesus is religious in the sense
that he accepts the traditional forms of religious authority.
He accepts the Scriptures as bearing witness to the life God expects.
He has his justified sinner praying in the temple like a good Jew.
On another occasion, Jesus sent some lepers he had healed to the temple
to show the priests so that their healing could be properly witnessed,
as the Jewish religious law required.
Jesus was against pride and self righteousness.
But he was for organised religion and spiritual authority.
Most of all, Jesus was for spiritual humility.
Jesus said,
"Those who humble themselves will be exalted."