

‘LIKED’ OR ‘LOVED’?

Luke 18:9-17

The Parable of Pharisee and Tax Collector—our church window presents the story this way:



It may be more familiar to us with this scene:



This is clearly a “Good guys” versus “Bad guys” scene. It is like in the old melodramas where the villain tying the heroine to the railroad tracks, dressed in black and the hero who rescues her is dressed in white. The Lone Ranger wore white. The Pharisee who comes to God saying how great a person he is exudes “bad guy.” The poor tax collector who begs God for mercy is the “good guy.”

Yet, who are the “Good Guys” today? In comedies like “Animal House” or the “Blues Brothers” the “heroes” care nothing for what is right or moral. In serious movies the “good guys” aren’t dressed in black. Clint Eastwood made the “Dirty Harry” movies which reflect so often how police are okay breaking the law if they get the “bad guys.” The “Fast and Furious” heroes are hardly what we would call “good” people. In the Marvel Comic Movies you never seem to know from movie to movie who is good and who is bad.

Heroes today are the people who buck the system. “Rock and roll” music is based on being rebellious. It proclaims, “School’s out for summer,” not “Studying is good for you.”

This also changes the perception of the “bad guys.” In the “Batman” movie, Heath Ledger won a posthumous Oscar for his portrayal of the “Joker.” Even though he was clearly evil, he was the star of the show, because like a lot of bad guys, he is a lot more interesting than the “good guy.” Billy Joel once sang, “I’d rather laugh with the sinners, then cry with the saints.”

That leads me to the question, “Would a tax collector, the “bad guy” repent in our world today?”

It might help for us to understand what it meant to be a tax collector in Jesus’ time. We may picture them as clearly evil people who want to make a lot of wealth off of other people. The Romans found out what many cities have found out in our world today. It is cheaper and often more efficient to contract out for services than to provide them directly. Many cities included employees that removed garbage, drove the buses, and maintained the streets. More and more cities now contract out to businesses to do that. This causes competition which leads to cheaper costs and better service. The Romans did this with tax collection. Instead of Roman officials collecting taxes, they contracted individuals from the people of a particular town or region to do it for them. The Romans would back this up if the people refused. But they found that they got more tax revenue if the contracted tax collectors did it for them. In return, the collectors would charge extra to earn their keep.

Normally people today don’t like the IRS or tax collection, but mainly because they take away our income. For a tax collection among the Jews that was just the tip of the iceberg. The big problem with a tax collector is that he worked for the Romans. Many other people did not like the Romans, but they admitted that the Romans brought them peace, good roads, safe travel, and aqueducts which brought water to the cities for drinking and good plumbing. But for Jews the Romans were pagans who prevented them from restoring a new King David to the throne in Jerusalem. They kept the Jews from removing all the Gentile “pollution” that had led to the Old Testament people going into exile. The Jews in Palestine continually rebelled against the Romans. Palestine was always a trouble spot for Rome. And this brought about two great Jewish revolts around 70 and 130 AD that were extremely costly to Rome and disastrous to the Jews. So if you worked for Rome like a tax collector, you were shunned and hated.

This would lead to the question, “Why would anyone be a tax collector?” Maybe it was just a matter of greed. But remember the most famous tax collector in the Bible? It was that “wee-little” man named Zacchaeus. What difference did it make to him to be rejected by the people around him? He already was looked down upon for being so small. Tax collectors were often people who were outcast among their own people, so why not just accept it and gain some

wealth? The tax collectors were not the “bad guys” because they cheated people. They were “bad guys” because they were outcasts—the people no one wanted to be.

In contrast to that we have the Pharisees. We might picture them as evil, like the corrupt politicians or the bankers on Wall Street who have stolen from peoples’ mortgages and pensions. They may dress nice, but they are clearly bad. But is that how they were viewed by the people? The Pharisees had no government power. That had no backing from the Romans. In fact they made a point of clearly separating themselves from anything Roman or Gentile. They often were wealthy, but they built a lot of the synagogues in the communities and faithfully went to worship and prayer. Their power came from their popularity as people whom the common people looked up to.

Who are the “outcasts” today? Despite great efforts by school teachers and administrations to prevent it, children get “bullied” by their peers for being “different.” Maybe it is people who don’t keep up to our standards or keep their lawns looking good or those who were not trained by their parents to be polite like we were. We all deal with people we just don’t like.

So who are the Pharisees today? It is not the crooked politicians, the Russians invaders of Ukraine or the unreasonable boss. It is the good, upstanding people in the community who go regularly to church and are respected among their peers. So often if I am honest, I am the Pharisee!

Pharisees are people who are likable because they are people like us. They keep their property in good shape, pay their taxes, contribute to their churches, and don’t get into trouble. They are people who do not bother or offend us, people we often like. So we figure they are “likable” to God.

But the whole point is that no one is “likable” to God. Even our seemingly most kind and charitable actions on our own are done to get an advantage for us. We politely let someone go first, but in return we feel good and the person sees us as “nice.” We give to help a cause, but often that is so when can feel good about walking away from the problem. All the “good” that the Pharisee brought to God in the temple was garbage to God.

The tax collector, by comparison, was not “good.” He made no attempt to pretend he was. He simply threw himself at the mercy of God—and was forgiven! He did not suddenly become “likable” to God. No, he was loved, forgiven.

What can make it so hard and dangerous to rescue someone who is drowning: how they struggle. From that person’s perspective, he is doing what he can to help save him. But it only gets in the way. It is so better to just relax and let the rescuer rescue.

Our efforts to be “likable” to God only get in the way of His forgiveness. Instead like the tax collector we throw ourselves at His mercy and look to our rescuer—Christ Jesus. Then we see that we are loved, not “liked” by God. Yes, God is pleased as we grow in faith and do good from that. But we always go back to our Baptisms when God took us sinful people and looked on us as He continues to look at us through the goodness of Jesus alone.

We have wonderful gifts in the Church to help us be the tax collector rather than the Pharisee. It is called “Confession and Absolution.” “Absolution” comes from “absolved,” which means “forgiven.” Usually at the beginning of our service we confess to God our sins then receive His forgiveness through the pastor who represents the Church which Jesus has given the power to forgive. If as Christians we become “good” and “likable” to God, then why would we need forgiveness? But confession reminds us that we can never be “likable” to God. Instead we are loved.