

Sermon Notes
4-27-08
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The 'I-thank-you-God-I'm-not-like-other-people' syndrome can show itself not only in individuals, but also corporately. We can show the same spirit about families, churches, and nations. "God, I thank you my family/church/nation is not like other families/churches/nations." All kinds of great tragedies have been justified in the name of God by corporate self-righteousness. The spirit of the Pharisees – trusting one's own righteousness and thereby despising others – has been alive and well in every era of history. It's a temptation the church will never escape because in our fallenness we will always gravitate towards some of self-justification that gives us an excuse for mistreating and loathing others. Those who justify themselves automatically find a way to justify their prejudices and hatreds.

There is a contemporary debate over the whether the Pharisee's self-righteousness consisted boasting in their Jewishness (especially their positions of leadership among the Jews) or boasting in their moral accomplishments. The reality is that there is a good deal of evidence for both in the NT. For example, the Pharisee in Lk. 18:9-14 brags about his moral achievements. Paul's Jewish interlocutor in Romans 2 clearly believes he is morally superior to the Gentiles – though Paul shows him otherwise in the argument in that chapter. At any rate, moral boasting was clearly an issue for Jews, especially Pharisees.

But in Lk. 3:8, Jn. 8:31ff, and Phil. 3:1ff the boast is in Jewish identity as such. In Jn. 11:45-48, the Jewish leaders show an idolatrous devotion to their status/position and nation. And so on. Again and again, we see an arrogant and elitist spirit characterizing the Jews in general and the Pharisees in particular – and this spirit arises from their belief that God has chosen them and blessed them in a unique way. Indeed, the Jews seemed so confident in their covenantal standing, that they seemed to think they could get away with all kinds of lawlessness. A careful reading of the NT shows that the Jews are accused of antinomianism *much more frequently* than nomism/legalism. The issue is not so much that Jews thought they could earn God's favor by how well they lived but that they thought they could not lose his favor no matter how badly they lived. Presumption, more than proto-Pelagianism, is singled out as the problem. Jesus' responses to those who question him about eternal life in Lk. 10:25 and 18:18 confirm this. Jesus' answer (essentially "Do this and you will live") is not appropriate if the questioners came thinking they needed to earn eternal life by doing good works; indeed, his reply is the opposite of what one would expect on that assumption.

What likely accounts for this gap, this combination of legalism and antinomianism, is hypocrisy. Indeed, hypocrisy, more than anything else, becomes the primary sin Jesus exposes in the culture of the Pharisees. The Pharisees' profession and lifestyle did not match; their creeds and deeds were at odds with one another. They were obsessed with looking good and devout in the eyes of men (e.g., Jn. 5). But in reality, they were quite rebellious. Indeed, when the Pharisee in the parable says that he not like the rest – the

seizing, the unjust, the adulterers – we have some reason to question whether or not his claim is honest. The Pharisee is quite likely guilty of the very things he accuses others of doing. For example, the Pharisee is thankful he is not like the “seizing” – but Jesus has used a word from the same root to describe the Pharisees in Lk. 11:39!! The Pharisees *are* seizers. Elsewhere in the gospels, we find reason to believe the Pharisees were adulterers and extortionists, albeit in secret. They twisted the demands of the law to suit their selfish, lustful desires, and they abused the poor and the widows. The evidence the Pharisee gives in the parable for his righteousness (18:11b) is telling not only by what it includes but also in what it leaves out, namely the weightier matters of the law.

I need to qualify my assertion that Jesus did not attack the Pharisees’ theology. In a way he does accuse them of false theology when he accuses them of failing to believe Moses (Jn. 5:39) and when he says they set aside the Word of God for the sake of their traditions (Mt. 15:3ff). But even Jesus’ own disciples failed to understand the Christocentric message of the earlier biblical revelation (Lk. 24) so that was not a mark of Pelagian theology in itself. Besides, Jesus could affirm that the Pharisees sat in Moses’ seat and commended the people to follow their teaching, though not their example (Mt. 23:2-3). Thus, I stand by my basic assertion in the sermon: the fundamental problems with the Pharisees were pride, hypocrisy, lawlessness, and hatred of others, rather than trying to earn God’s favor. Covenant presumption was a bigger problem than proto-Pelagianism; they assumed their membership in Abraham’s family would protect them from future judgment (cf. Mt. 23; Rom. 2:1-16). If their works played a role, it was not meriting salvation but making themselves look good and pious before others (e.g., Mt. 15:1-20; Lk. 16:13ff).

Derrick Oliff’s essay “Looking for Legalism” (<http://www.homes.org/theologia/derrick-olliff/looking-for-legalism>) provides a helpful survey of the NT evidence. Oliff explains that the ultimate condemnation of the Pharisees comes simply because they reject Jesus as messiah. After acknowledging that there were various categories of Pharisees, some of whom were good and faithful, he summarizes the NT’s generalization of the Pharisees as hypocrites:

Therefore, the picture of the Pharisees that is regularly given in the N.T. is one of petty (gnat-straining) additive legalism combined with an antinomian rejection of the weightier matters of the law. They didn’t want people plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, but they were perfectly willing to undermine the commandment to honor father and mother with a sophistic casuistry. And all of this was done while they projected a picture of pietism towards others but it was done without much of an interest in proper desires or motivations (i.e., formalism). There is a term for this: ‘hypocrisy.’ And indeed, Jesus didn’t say that the leaven (i.e., the teaching) of the Pharisees was merit legalism. Rather, he said it was hypocrisy. That, not merit legalism, was their problem...

Israel was antinomian and unbelieving. She didn’t live according to the law and when Jesus came, she rejected Him as the Messiah sent to redeem the nation and usher in the kingdom of God. The problem with the Pharisees was pretty much

the same except with a twist. They rejected Jesus as well, but instead of a generic and generalized antinomianism, theirs was a more specific “hypocrisy” — a combination of petty additive legalism and antinomianism done to make themselves look pious but formalistically done without the concern for a truly pious attitude or motivation. And that is why Jesus condemned them. In His most comprehensive critique, he catalogued their leaven and behavior (Matt. 23:1-30) and then He pronounced judgment (Matt. 23:31-36). Those were the sins of the Pharisees.

Flannery O’Connor’s short stories are probably the best literary presentations of the gospel I have ever read. Yes, that means her works surpass even the better known Christian-fantasy allegories of Lewis and Tolkien, at least in this regard. It is certainly possible to over-read her works and she feared over-reading far more than under-reading. But at the same time, the symbolic and structural elements of her stories are shot through with the gospel. She was quite private about her intentions in her stories; like most artists she wanted to guard the mystery and ambiguity intrinsic in her medium. But I think my interpretation of “Revelation,” especially the link with Lk. 18:9-14, is fairly standard among analysts of the story.

My use of “Revelation” in the sermon was necessarily brief. The story has countless additional details that could be brought in to further enrich the theological weight of the narrative. Mrs. Turpin’s self-congratulatory speech with Mary Grace’s mother, her self-satisfied attitude regarding her position in the world, and her description of feigned kindness towards her supposed inferiors are classic illustrations of the Pharisaical sin described in Lk. 18:9. Turpin’s categorization of others (based on house and land ownership, race, blood lineage, cleanliness, and wealth) may or may not be the categories we are tempted to use to evaluate others, but we can quite easily find ourselves doing the same thing, and like Turpin, positioning ourselves so that we are superior to everyone. We can be just as condescending and paternalistic. We can be just as smug and snobbish.

Another notable tidbit I passed over: After the surly Mary grace hurls the *Human Development* book at Turpin and tries to strangle her, she has an epileptic fit. Turpin’s response (“What have you got to say to me?”) is telling. Turpin is so concerned about her own dignity, she has no compassion on a girl who is obviously sick. All Turpin cares about is her own rights; she is blind to the true needs of others. What she wants is an apology and some recompense. What she gets, of course, is a revelation that ultimately shocks into a new sense of self-awareness and humility.

But there may well be more going on with Mary Grace’s seizure. In paganism, seizures are sometimes associated with ecstatic states of consciousness and shamanism; that is to say, epileptic fits are often connected with revelations from the gods. Seizures are also connected with outcasts; epileptics were often treated as quasi-lepers, cut off from the community. When Turpin has her vision at the end of the story, freaks and lunatics are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of the socially respectable folks. No doubt, that includes the likes of Mary Grace.

More significantly, there is a trace of church tradition that claims Paul was an epileptic. The story itself gives every confirmation that Mary Grace's message ("Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!") does indeed come from God. It is delivered by a girl whose name recalls the Savior (Mary's son, Jesus) and his gift of salvation (grace). Moreover, the messenger suffers from an ailment that traditions also ascribed to the apostle Paul. Mary Grace delivers an apostolic, prophetic message of judgment against Turpin. The rest of the story concerns Turpin's reaction. Will she heed the warning and repent of her self-righteousness? Or will she end up going to hell as a hard-hearted modern-day Pharisee?

For more thoughts on how to interpret O'Connor's work, check out these helpful posts by Steve Wilkins: <http://auburnavenue.org/blog/archives/42#more-42> and <http://auburnavenue.org/blog/archives/32>.

A bit more about the Obama quote I used in the sermon. Albert Mohler provides some analysis here: http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=1131.

Ironically, I think Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, is a good illustration of the kind of attitude that Obama ascribes to small-town folk in America. Wright uses his religion to justify his "reverse racism."

This just proves the point I was making in the sermon: Everyone is tempted to trust in themselves and despise others.

As I said in the sermon, this parable is not the first time in Luke's gospel we have come across a contrast between tax collectors and Pharisees. These encounters are a recurrent feature of the gospel: 5:27-39, 7:29-30, 15:1-2, etc. These two categories represent two different types of people and two different reactions to Jesus. This is Luke's way of making the purpose of Jesus' mission very vivid: Jesus came to rescue sinners, even the greatest of sinners. But those who locate their righteousness somewhere other than in his death and resurrection will be condemned, no matter how good, devout, and pious they might otherwise appear to be.

The tax collectors rejoice when they meet Jesus because he gives them hope. They know they need saving and he comes to be their Savior. But the Pharisees believe they are already "in the right." They have no needs – and so they find the presence and message of Jesus highly offensive. Rather than accepting Jesus' judgment of them, they insist on sitting in judgment of Jesus.

A recent post by Peter Leithart captures the problem with self-righteousness/trusting in oneself that one is righteous very well (<http://www.leithart.com/2008/04/04/self-righteousness/>): "Protestants often claim that our sinfulness is manifest in our efforts to earn God's favor by our works. That is true, but it doesn't quite get at the most grievous

root of sin. Barth is more penetrating in saying that our sinfulness is manifest in our efforts to usurp God's place. A sinner who's trying to earn God's favor is still acknowledging God as Judge; Barth sees that our sin consists in the fact that we want to be our own judges, measured by our own (rather cushy) standards."

C. S. Lewis' essay "The Trouble with X" is an excellent look at how we judge others in a blinded, self-righteous way. Lewis shows that Phariseism is destructive of true community and family. (Thanks to A. K. Shauku for bringing this essay to my attention.)

Here is the essay in full (see <http://www.btinternet.com/~a.ghinn/the.htm>):

I suppose I may assume that seven out of ten of those who read these lines are in some kind of difficulty about some other human being. Either at work or at home, either the people who employ you or those whom you employ, either those who share your house or those whose house you share, either your in-laws or parents or children, your wife or your husband, are making life harder for you than it need be even in these days. It is to be hoped that we do not often mention these difficulties (especially the domestic ones) to outsiders. But sometimes we do. An outside friend asks us why we are looking so glum; and the truth comes out. On such occasions the outside friend usually says, 'But why don't you tell them? Why don't you go to your wife (or husband, or father, or daughter, or boss, or landlady, or lodger) and have it all out? People are usually reasonable. All you've got to do is to make them see things in the right light. Explain it to them in a reasonable, quiet, friendly way' And we, whatever we say outwardly, think sadly to ourselves, 'He doesn't know "X".' We do. We know how utterly hopeless it is to make 'X' see reason. Either we've tried it over and over again - tried it till we are sick of trying it - or else we've never tried it because we saw from the beginning how useless it would be. We know that if we attempt to 'have it all out with "X" ' there will either be a 'scene', or else 'X' will stare at us in blank amazement and say 'I don't know what on earth you're talking about'; or else (which is perhaps worst of all) 'X' will quite agree with us and promise to turn over a new leaf and put everything on a new footing - and then, twenty-four hours later, will be exactly the same as 'X' has always been.

You know, in fact, that any attempt to talk things over with 'X' will shipwreck on the old, fatal flaw in 'X's' character. And you see, looking back, how all the plans you have ever made always have shipwrecked on that fatal flaw - on 'X's' incurable jealousy, or laziness, or touchiness, or muddle-headedness, or bossiness, or ill temper, or changeableness. Up to a certain age you have perhaps had the illusion that some external stroke of good fortune - an improvement in health, a rise of salary, the end of the war - would solve your difficulty. But you know better now. The war is over, and you realize that even if the other things happened, 'X' would still be 'X', and you would still be up against the same old problem. Even if you became a millionaire, your husband would still be a bully, or your wife would still nag or your son would still drink, or you'd still have to have your mother-in-law to live with you.

It is a great step forward to realize that this is so; to face the fact that even if all external things went right, real happiness would still depend on the character of the people you have to live with - and that you can't alter their characters. And now comes the point. When you have seen this you have, for the first time, had a glimpse of what it must be like for God. For, of course, this is (in one way) just what God Himself is up against. He has provided a rich, beautiful world for people to live in. He has given them intelligence to show them how it can be used, and conscience to show them how it ought to be used. He has contrived that the things they need for their biological life (food, drink, rest, sleep, exercise) should be positively delightful to them. And, having done all this, He then sees all His plans spoiled - just as our little plans are spoiled - by the crookedness of the people themselves. All the things He has given them to be happy with they turn into occasions for quarrelling and jealousy, and excess and hoarding, and tomfoolery.

You may say it is very different for God because He could, if He pleased, alter people's characters, and we can't. But this difference doesn't go quite as deep as we may at first think. God has made it a rule for Himself that He won't alter people's character by force. He can and will alter them - but only if the people will let Him. In that way He has really and truly limited His power. Sometimes we wonder why He has done so, or even wish that He hadn't. But apparently He thinks it worth doing. He would rather have a world of free beings, with all its risks, than a world of people who did right like machines because they couldn't do anything else. The more we succeed in imagining what a world of perfect automatic beings would be like, the more, I think, we shall see His wisdom. I said that when we see how all our plans shipwreck on the characters of the people we have to deal with, we are 'in one way' seeing what it must be like for God. But only in one way. There are two respects in which God's view must be very different from ours. In the first place, He sees (like you) how all the people in your home or your job are in various degrees awkward or difficult; but when He looks into that home or factory or office He sees one more person of the same kind - the one you never do see. I mean, of course, yourself. That is the next great step in wisdom - to realize that you also are just that sort of person. You also have a fatal flaw in your character. All the hopes and plans of others have again and again shipwrecked on your character just as your hopes and plans have shipwrecked on theirs.

It is no good passing this over with some vague, general admission such as 'Of course, I know I have my faults.' It is important to realize that there is some really fatal flaw in you: something which gives the others just that same feeling of despair which their flaws give you. And it is almost certainly something you don't know about - like what the advertisements call 'halitosis', which everyone notices except the person who has it. But why, you ask, don't the others tell me? Believe me, they have tried to tell you over and over again, and you just couldn't 'take it'. Perhaps a good deal of what you call their 'nagging' or 'bad temper' or 'queerness' are just their attempts to make you see the truth. And even the faults you do know you don't know fully. You say, 'I admit I lost my temper last night'; but the others know that you're always doing it, that you are a bad-tempered person. You say, 'I

admit I drank too much last Saturday'; but everyone else knows that you are a habitual drunkard.

That is one way in which God's view must differ from mine. He sees all the characters: I see all except my own. But the second difference is this. He loves the people in spite of their faults. He goes on loving. He does not let go. Don't say, 'It's all very well for Him; He hasn't got to live with them.' He has. He is inside them as well as outside them. He is with them far more intimately and closely and incessantly than we can ever be. Every vile thought within their minds (and ours), every moment of spite, envy, arrogance, greed and self-conceit comes right up against His patient and longing love, and grieves His spirit more than it grieves ours.

The more we can imitate God in both these respects, the more progress we shall make. We must love 'X' more; and we must learn to see ourselves as a person of exactly the same kind. Some people say it is morbid to be always thinking of one's own faults. That would be all very well if most of us could stop thinking of our own without soon beginning to think about those of other people. For unfortunately we enjoy thinking about other people's faults: and in the proper sense of the word 'morbid', that is the most morbid pleasure in the world.

We don't like rationing which is imposed upon us, but I suggest one form of rationing which we ought to impose on ourselves. Abstain from all thinking about other people's faults, unless your duties as a teacher or parent make it necessary to think about them. Whenever the thoughts come unnecessarily into one's mind, why not simply shove them away? And think of one's own faults instead? For there, with God's help, one can do something. Of all the awkward people in your house or job there is only one whom you can improve very much. That is the practical end at which to begin. And really, we'd better. The job has to be tackled some day: and every day we put it off will make it harder to begin.

What, after all, is the alternative? You see clearly enough that nothing, not even God with all His power, can make 'X' really happy as long as 'X' remains envious, self-centred, and spiteful. Be sure there is something inside you which, unless it is altered, will put it out of God's power to prevent your being eternally miserable.

While that something remains there can be no Heaven for you, just as there can be no sweet smells for a man with a cold in the nose, and no music for a man who is deaf. It's not a question of God 'sending' us to Hell. In each of us there is something growing up which will of itself be Hell unless it is nipped in the bud. The matter is serious: let us put ourselves in His hands at once - this very day, this hour.