

Jubilee Spirituality: Be Like the Worst Tax Collector - On Generosity and Repair

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Preacher: Heidi Mills

[0 : 00] My name is Heidi Mills and I am the co-director of community here at the table. And this service is particularly important for me because yesterday I celebrated my five-year anniversary at the table.

Yeah, it's a big milestone and it just makes me reflect that five years ago when I first stepped through the doors of the table, I did not even fathom that I would be standing in front of you today preaching, which is just a testament to how God is working in this community and how I found a place to belong and step into my gifts.

So this moment is very important to me and I treasure this community so much. But yeah, I will open in prayer. Dear Lord, I thank you so much for this community.

I thank you for all the ways that you show up in our lives, all the ways that we see you working in the day-to-day of our lives. Even when we don't see it, you are working.

I thank you for just all of the people who are here today, whether they are here watching online or here in person. I pray that no matter what we bring into this space, that there will be a word for anybody here and that we will come out of this space calmer and more connected to you and each other than we did when we started.

[1 : 30] In Jesus' name, amen. So one of my favorite sayings is, it's a trap. And I use it all the time because it can be appropriate in so many different situations.

For example, your boss asks you to stay late just this once. It's a trap. Or it starts raining and you think, oh, it's not going to be that bad, even though it's thunderstorm season in D.C.

and you forgot your umbrella. It's a trap. Or you decide to wake up early to watch the Women's World Cup final, even though you know you have a full day ahead of you.

It's a trap. And this same statement applies to our faith. Sometimes figuring out how to live out our faith feels like running into traps time and time again.

And some traps are laid by others. For many of us, churches have been places of exclusion for those on the margins, they have alienated those who are deconstructing or people who step outside the bounds of what a good Christian is supposed to do and be.

[2 : 42] But some of the traps are laid in our own ideas about who we are, who God is, and who others are. Our mind plays tricks on us, telling us that we are outside God's grace because we've made too many mistakes.

It tells us maybe this faith is not for us anymore. Or we get sucked into cycles of performing for God. Or God feels so distant from our hearts, even though our heads might know that God is always with us.

Learning to recognize these traps is essential to our faith. In this series, we've been talking about the idea of jubilee spirituality. And to me, this sermon series encourages us to step away from anything that prevents us from experiencing true freedom with God and one another.

For example, Aaron talked a few weeks ago about worry and anxiety. And Topher talked about getting comfortable with being uncomfortable. And then last week, Tochi talked about the call toward radical humility.

And today, I want to explore a parable that reveals another trap standing in the way of jubilee spirituality and hopefully shows us how to avoid it.

[3 : 54] So if you have a Bible, please turn to Luke chapter 18, verses 9 through 14. In this parable, Jesus is speaking to a mixed crowd containing Pharisees, tax collectors, and others.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or that tax collector over there.

I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all of my income. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And I tell you, this man went down to his home justified, rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

[5 : 17] We all know people like the Pharisee. He embodies that us-versus-them mentality that shows up in so many faith spaces. And Jesus' audience would have been familiar with this image of the Pharisee.

Jesus often compares them to unwashed cups or whitewashed tombs, because they have the appearance of purity on the outside, but they are exposed as hypocrites in their hearts.

And in this parable, the Pharisee falls into those traps of pride and comparison. He's proud of himself for acting in the right way before God and denigrates others for not doing the same.

I automatically dislike the Pharisee in this passage, because his prayer is so arrogant. It's no wonder that he's standing by himself, because no one likes to be around a self-righteous person.

But unfortunately, he reminds me of so many people that I know. And more importantly, he represents that faith tradition that I have tried so hard to leave behind.

[6 : 28] Perhaps like many of you, I grew up in a highly conservative religious tradition where people were divided into the lost and the saved. And the saved needed to go out there and save as many souls as possible from eternal damnation.

I remember asking my parents what it was like for people who weren't Christian, and they answered that those people had a hole in their hearts that could only be filled by Jesus.

And we wouldn't have said it exactly this way, but secretly, we were proud not to be like them. And as I moved out of that tradition during college and after, I encountered this hyper-focus on doing all the right things in order to be a good Christian.

I was haunted by this idea that there was only one right way to be a proper Christian. Everyone needed to be straight, married, with kids, ideally before the age of 25.

They needed to read their Bible every morning, pray without ceasing, never miss a Sunday. They needed to stand against the wrong social causes and stand for the right ones.

[7 : 38] They needed to believe in biblical inerrancy and not ask too many questions. And they definitely could not be queer or feminist or questioning or deconstructing.

In anything outside, the white frame of reference was discarded. If you had doubts or you didn't behave exactly in the right way, you were viewed with concern and suspicion.

It was such an oppressive environment to be a part of, which is the reason why so many of us, myself included, left that tradition behind. And I imagine it wasn't much easier for people to be around the Pharisee in Jesus' time.

Compare the Pharisee to the tax collector. The tax collector was in a similar social position. People didn't want to be around the self-righteousness of the Pharisee, but they also didn't want to be around the corruption of the tax collector.

During Jesus' time, tax collectors were infamous for taking advantage of others through dishonest business practices. And Jesus caused a lot of controversy for inviting tax collectors like Matthew to be his disciples.

[8 : 50] But this tax collector seems to be doing the right thing. He leaves behind that trap of pride and comparison, and he approaches God with humility.

He is willing to repent. He is so aware that he has done wrong that he can't even look up to heaven. And he declares probably one of the most famous prayers in the entire Bible.

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. There was so much in these seven words. Perhaps we would do well to repeat this prayer in our own lives, but it is often the most difficult, because this prayer requires us to acknowledge not only the sin out there, but the sin in here.

And I confess that this prayer causes me to stumble sometimes. It might be strange for me to stand in front of you and admit this, but I don't like calling myself a sinner.

It reminds me too much of that fire and brimstone theology that has caused so much damage. I remember sitting in church and hearing those endless lectures about human nature.

[10 : 04] Even if some of us didn't grow up in that same tradition, we all know the lines. Humans are sinful above all things. We are not worthy to be in the presence of God because God cannot abide sin.

In the words of the most infamous fire and brimstone preacher of them all, Jonathan Edwards, we are sinners in the hands of an angry God. And God is holding us over the fire like a spider.

Calling myself a sinner doesn't make it easier for me to approach God. It makes me feel that I am so ugly that God cannot even bear to look upon me. It's a recipe for shame, guilt, and despair.

And particularly for those of us outside the mold of what a Christian should be, the topic of sin is complicated. But the reality is, sometimes we do sin.

When we do something wrong, whether it's in our relationship with God, others, or creation, it is our responsibility to acknowledge our mistake, to turn around, and to do better next time.

[11 : 14] When we admit that we have sinned, it opens the door for forgiveness. Refusing to admit when we are wrong is a trap, and the tax collector successfully avoids it.

In another sermon, the lesson here in this parable would be simple. Don't be like the Pharisee. Be like the tax collector.

The tax collector embodies radical humility, which we talked about last week. He shows us that it's better to lower ourselves before God rather than exalt ourselves for being better.

When we are willing to be humble, when we can admit that we are wrong, we are invited into the process of generosity and repair with God and each other.

All of this is important. But I think there's more. I think that Jesus is pulling a trick on us. In other words, it's a trap.

[12 : 17] Thank you for that. Because when I first read this passage, I want to dismiss the Pharisee for his pride.

He is so clearly wrong for elevating himself above other people. But on the other hand, I sympathize with the tax collector, who is at least wise enough to admit his sin.

At first, Jesus seems to lead us to one conclusion. The tax collector was humble. He is therefore right with God, and he is exalted. But since the Pharisee exalts himself, he is brought low, and he is not right with God.

So the only person who wins is the tax collector. But I want us to go a little deeper. I want us to ask two questions. What if both the tax collector and the Pharisee are right?

And what if they are both wrong? In the passage, you'll notice that we receive no sign that the tax collector does anything about his change of heart.

[13 : 26] We can infer that he does, but Jesus doesn't tell us. So it's possible that the tax collector said the sinner's prayer, and then walked away unchanged.

And we can also examine the tax collector's posture. He can't even look up to heaven. He is so ground down in the dust with despair that the idea of approaching God with boldness seems like nothing but a shadow of a dream he once had about God's mercy.

But on the other hand, the Pharisee does a couple important things right. First, he approaches God with confident gratitude, knowing that God has blessed him.

And second, he backs up his gratitude with action. Yes, he is prideful, but he is also walking the talk by fasting and tithing.

Yet we so often elevate the tax collector. And that is the trap. By elevating the tax collector above the Pharisee, we are in fact committing the same mistake as the Pharisee.

[14 : 35] When we finish reading this parable, it's natural to sit back and say, Thank God, I am not like the Pharisee, who is so self-righteous and arrogant.

Thank God, I am like the tax collector. See how clever Jesus is here? See how he is laying a trap for his audience? The audience was primed to cast the Pharisee as the villain.

Jesus is subverting the archetype of the tax collector, so we naturally sympathize with him, especially because he is doing what he is supposed to be doing. But when we pass judgment on the Pharisee, we effectively become the Pharisee.

We become the ones who trust in our own righteousness, our own ability to repent, and look down on the Pharisee with contempt. And on one level, this is 100% natural.

When we have been harmed by other people of faith who think that they have all the right answers, it's hard to be empathetic. For example, it hurts to think that my religious community back home in Maine may not accept my faith or my call to ministry because I am a woman or because I am too liberal and queer.

[15 : 55] Extending grace toward people who have caused harm through this rhetoric of exclusion and opposition is a vulnerable place to be. But on another level, it is too seductive to other the Pharisee.

Now that I have been part of the table for five years, I can sometimes fall into this idea that I am suddenly doing Christianity right. I sometimes judge others for not getting how justice is a part of the gospel or for having more conservative beliefs despite knowing that they are also just trying to seek after God and despite knowing that not too long ago I was the Pharisee.

I held those same beliefs. Just because I have deconstructed, that does not mean that I have reconstructed this perfect understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

I am still susceptible to continuing to be the Pharisee as I look down on others with different beliefs. I have to remind myself that I don't have the right answers and the table church does not have all the right answers.

We have to guard against this tendency to otherize anyone who does not think exactly the same as we do about issues near and dear to our hearts, especially when it comes to our faith.

[17 : 24] We are called to avoid these traps of pride and comparison and move toward a jubilee spirituality that honors everybody, the Pharisee and the tax collector.

In this parable, Jesus calls us to expand our ideas about generosity toward others and move toward authentic repair with each other and with God.

let's take a second look at the final line of this parable. I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted. I've already mentioned how this passage appears to reverse the hierarchy by setting the tax collector on top and putting the Pharisee on the bottom.

But this doesn't sound like jubilee spirituality to me. The tax collector might be free, but what about the Pharisee? Despite the Pharisee's sins, of which there are many, it does not seem right to me that one walks away justified and the other does not.

[18 : 42] After all, both of them are seeking after God the best way they know how. This is where I think our translation often does us a disservice because it reinforces the divide between those two men and does not advocate for their restoration to one another.

When I was doing research for this sermon, struggling with my dislike of the Pharisee, I stumbled across this commentary that changed everything and I would be happy to get you a copy of it.

It's called the Wisdom Commentary and it's absolutely brilliant. The commentary talks about how the Greek phrase that we translate as rather than can be translated differently.

It can also mean alongside or because of. So rather than setting up an antagonism, it can be a juxtaposition.

So we can translate that final line as follows. I tell you, this man went down to his home justified alongside the other.

[19 : 54] For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. So it's not about who's in and who's out.

Instead, this passage encourages us to consider where we are in relationship to God and to one another. Are we standing apart from God and each other?

Do we elevate ourselves above other people simply because of how we relate to God? Do we rely on our own actions to earn favor before God? Or do we throw ourselves at the feet of God asking for God's forgiveness?

It doesn't matter how you answer those questions. What matters is what the tax collector prayed. God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

The tax collector and the Pharisee are both in need of God's mercy, which is more than sufficient for both of them. But they will only experience freedom when they connect with God and one another.

[21 : 03] The tax collector has what the Pharisee needs and vice versa. And when we avoid the trap of pitting ourselves against one another, we can step into Jubilee spirituality.

Jubilee spirituality invites us into the generosity of God's mercy. It also urges us toward repair with our neighbor.

I want to break this down a little bit further. Jubilee spirituality invites us into the generosity of God's mercy. There is nothing that we can do to earn God's mercy or forgiveness.

It is simply there, ready for us to access. And there is no better example of this than the parable of the prodigal son just a few chapters earlier in Luke.

Both the older brother and the younger brother struggled in their relationship with their father. The older brother thought he needed to do everything right, much like the Pharisee.

[22 : 10] And the younger brother sacrificed his father's fortune on frivolous living. But the father's arms are open wide to them both. The grace is always there.

I'll say it again. There's nowhere we can go, nothing that we can do that is outside outside God's grace. We don't have to perform for God.

We don't have to perform for God's grace like the Pharisee. And in the words of beloved poet Mary Oliver, we also do not have to walk on our knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

We can simply rest in the goodness of God's grace. But that's only half the story. Experiencing God's grace is only the first step.

The next step is to move toward each other. Jubilee spirituality urges us toward repair with our neighbor. The Pharisee needs the humility of the tax collector.

[23 : 25] The tax collector needs the bold gratitude of the Pharisee and the ability to put his faith into action. Without each other, they only see half the picture.

True Jubilee spirituality is not only about experiencing God's grace. It is also about seeing and honoring the image of God in another.

This idea has so many implications for our life together. For me, it makes me wonder how I might rediscover the beauty of my previous faith traditions and approach other people of faith with an attitude of learning and honoring.

Antonio's prayer earlier said it all. How can we see the mercy of God in churches that are very different from us? the mercy of God and the purpose of the peace of God but it also makes me want to move toward repair, knowing the importance of authentic relationships with others.

And when I talk about repair, I don't mean putting ourselves in harm's way for people who are not interested in reconciling but are only interested in causing more harm.

[24 : 39] I'm talking about that earnest work of repairing the breach when both parties can come together and realize what happened was wrong and commit to doing better next time.

We have to avoid the traps of comparing ourselves to others or thinking that we have all the right answers. Instead, we have to take the risk of being vulnerable long enough to turn to each other and admit, I need you.

Will you help me? We have the power to set one another free and in the end, that is the essence of Jubilee spirituality.

So I urge us to consider what all of this might look like for us. If we identify more as the Pharisee today, full of the confidence that we are doing all the right things for God, I hope that we might move toward a humble acknowledgement that all we have is God's and honor others also made in God's image.

And if we identify more as a tax collector, I hope that we might hold our brokenness and our belovedness together. I hope that we can become bold enough to admit our sins before God, lay it all down, and call ourselves a child of God with whom our Holy Mother is well-pleased.

[26 : 10] And then I invite us to contemplate where we might need to move toward repair. There is no shortage of broken relationships. For me, that looks like trying to bridge the gap with my conservative friends and family, if only they will meet me halfway.

For others, perhaps you are called to repair anything that causes us to forget that we need one another, whether that's homophobia, sexism, racism, or any other distortion of the image of God in another.

This week, no matter where you are on this journey, may you set yourself free from the traps of pride and comparison. May you emulate the boldness and the faithful action of the Pharisee.

May you be like the tax collector who showed true humility and experienced the grace of God. And above all, may we move toward one another in generosity and repair.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, I thank you for this moment when we are invited into a space to contemplate where we are in relation to you and to one another.

[27 : 32] I pray that no matter if we identify with the Pharisee or the tax collector or somewhere in the middle, that we will experience your goodness and your grace.

I pray that regardless of the pain and the hurt that lies in the past, that we will find ways to move toward restoration. I hope that in the coming week, we will experience the freedom that can only come from you.

I pray that for all of us in this room, that we will experience your goodness. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen.