

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	26 October 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Last Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

In today's gospel, Jesus tells a story, a parable about two men who went to pray together in the temple one day. Let's think about each in turn.

The first is a Pharisee. For members of this Jewish sect, the temple in Jerusalem was, as for all Jews, the epicentre of the world where God dwelt in a particular way, high and exalted seated on his cherubim throne. However, unlike with some other Jewish groups that we hear about in the New Testament such as the Sadducees, the Pharisees led a life that was primarily oriented not around the temple but around the home. As we see in much Jewish observance up to today, if you were a Pharisee, it was your home that was the vital centre of your religious faith and practice. In their religious observance, Pharisees would go to the temple to pray or to offer a sacrifice – as does the Pharisee in this parable. But primarily for them it was in your home and in your daily life, rather than in the temple, that you needed to practice your faithful religious observance. A daily life, faithful to God in little things, would involve regular prayer, obedience to the Jewish food laws, and keeping yourself morally and ritually pure, holy and uncontaminated by the world.

When the Pharisee prays in the temple, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men: thieves, rogues, adulterers', I don't think Jesus is necessarily wanting to tell us that, as is often assumed, he is some paragon of self-righteousness who is deliberately bigging himself up. In one sense, what he says is probably just a simple statement of fact: he is indeed neither a thief, a rogue or an adulterer. And similarly, when he says 'I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all my income', he is probably just saying what he habitually does.

So, what about the other man: the tax collector? Tax is a subject often in the news today. Indeed, it is in the headlines this morning. But in the world in which the Bible was written, the tax system had a very different nature. In modern societies we think of tax as a sort of contract with the government or local authority. We pay a certain amount of money in our taxes to the extent that we are able, and then the authorities return this to us in the form of public

services. In ancient Israel, however, the system was very different. A tax was a tribute, a bit like protection money paid to a gangster. By paying it you acknowledged that the body who received it – in this case the Roman state – ruled over you; that you were the subservient one. The tax collectors stood in an especially invidious position. Although Jewish themselves, they were collecting the tax on behalf of the Roman empire, and so upholding this quasi-protection racket by a foreign power. Hence, they were seen as lackeys and collaborators, widely despised and hated.

Moreover, the tax system was known to invite corruption. If you were a tax collector in the Roman Empire, you would pay the state a certain amount of money so that you had the right to collect taxes on its behalf. Say, then, that you were collecting a hundred pounds of taxes in a day on behalf of the state, you would want to collect a hundred and twenty pounds in order to make the effort worth your while. In the New Testament, tax collectors are often lumped together with prostitutes and simply described as 'sinners' and with some justification. So, when the tax collector goes to the temple and beats his breast, saying 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner', it is probably against the truth. A sinner, a corrupt and unscrupulous collaborator is exactly what he is.

So both men are probably telling the truth about themselves. Neither is lying, so what is the difference between them? The difference between them is that the Pharisee wants to present God with his strengths, with all of the things about him that are right and good and as they should be. On the other hand, the tax collector just brings to God that day his many weaknesses and his failures, and humbly asks for mercy.

In many ways, it is easy to sympathise with the Pharisee. We all enjoy being good at things and would love God to see only or mainly those places where we are strong, where we are clever, where we are virtuous, where we are successful. However, because God is God he sees the whole picture about us. We regularly say the wonderful prayer that is known as the *Collect for Purity*: 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid'. As we say it, we acknowledge that God sees those parts of us that are weakest and most vulnerable, the parts of which we are ashamed, and which we want to hide from him and from everybody else; perhaps even from ourselves. We would rather we did not have such aspects to our lives, and that neither he nor we could see these deep deficiencies. But, to our surprise, it is precisely these aspects of us that are the raw material that God can really work with.

Think of the Psalmist in the Old Testament: 'a broken and contrite heart, O Lord', he says, 'you will not despise' – God looks not for human hearts that are strong and robust, but for those that are broken and penitent and thus open to his healing and forgiveness. Or think of St Paul in the New Testament with words that God has given him: 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'. God's power is not made perfect in our strengths and personal triumphs, but in our weaknesses; in our failures; in those places where we feel ourselves to be inadequate. If we open ourselves to his grace, it is in those areas where we think we are weakest that he can be strong in us. And we will be like the tax collector who, having humbled himself that day at the temple, was able to go back comforted, restored, in right relationship with God, as the Bible puts it 'justified' to his home.