

Which Do We Despise Today?

Scripture Reading — Luke 18:9-14

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people ... or even like this tax collector.”
—Luke 18:11 —

Tax collectors were despised for two reasons. They were traitors because they collected taxes for the oppressive Roman Empire. And they overcharged their fellow Jews and kept the extra money for themselves. Because of these sins against God’s people, tax collectors were considered unclean. So it’s a surprise that in his parable Jesus speaks of a tax collector praying at the temple, where he wouldn’t be welcome.

The Pharisees, however, worked hard to be pure and spotless, to be able to say, with Psalm

26:4-5, “I do not sit with the deceitful ... I ... refuse to sit with the wicked.” If any of the Jews were righteous, it was the Pharisees. But Jesus says the tax collector in this story was justified—and not the Pharisee. That surely shocked his first listeners!

Today, however, we may have to avoid a similar pitfall. We might tend to despise the Pharisee and treat the tax collector as a hero. But that would be a mistake. We have to be careful not to be like the Pharisee, the one who despises others, even as we see that he’s a hypocrite.

Jesus’ judgment in this parable raises the question of how our assessment of people squares with God’s assessment. If we judge people as less than ourselves—whether Pharisee or tax collector—we are in danger of excluding ourselves from God. It’s that serious.

Prayer

Lord, we sometimes judge both the sinner and the self-righteous. Instead of disdain, we need your compassion for all people. We ask for that in Jesus’s name. Amen.

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