

**A Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 26, 2025**



Come to New Life!

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[Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to a mixed crowd who were a bit self-righteous and judgmental. He told them the story, which we call the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, to help them see their own failings. There is no report about whether or not they got the message.

So here's the story that Jesus told them. Two men go to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, rather full of himself, who tells God just how good he is. "God, I'm glad I am not like the other jerks around here! And especially that one over there, that Tax Collector. I do everything right – I fast, I tithe, I'm the perfect model of a good Pharisee!" Meanwhile, the Tax Collector stands off to the side, his head bowed, steeped in shame. His profession makes him a collaborator with the Roman oppressors, and he probably skims money off the top of the taxes he collects. He has nothing good to say about himself, and he is deeply ashamed. He begs, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Jesus praises the tax collector for his humility. The tax collector makes no excuses; he is completely open and begs God for forgiveness. His plea to God is sometimes called The Jesus Prayer: "Jesus, son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner." His honesty, his misery, his willingness to stand naked before God, makes him authentic and believable.

The story is counter cultural. Let us remember that there were some good Pharisees and some bad tax collectors, which was the normal expectation of those identities in that society, and so to turn the tables in this parable, Jesus is challenging the normal assumptions.

We have lots of examples today – from history, from today's headlines – about people who are rather full of themselves. I think Jesus wants us to ask ourselves which side we ourselves are on – are we the Pharisee, judging others? Or are we the Tax Collector, able to admit our own faults and strive for a more honest and humble life?

A colleague of mine, confronted with this story, confessed that it is humbling to find out that she can't do it all – that her management style is rather frenetic but in the end, not very effective. She said that it was humbling to understand that our place in the universe is just a speck, a tiny smidgeon of God's creation, and yet we are beloved of God. It isn't about trusting in ourselves, but about trusting in the God who loves us.

I try putting myself in the place of the Tax Collector. What happened to him anyway? Obviously he has had a major conversion experience. Here he was, merrily cheating poor people, serving the oppressors, lining his own pocket, and now he is begging forgiveness in the temple. Something happened to him, that he should make such a turnaround.

I was reading a report in Harper's Magazine recently, about the evolution of the news media, and who can we trust anymore. It was sobering and somewhat discouraging to see how far our information sources have strayed from journalistic ideals of truth telling. It was also a bit frightening, to me, to realize that most people these days don't get their information from newspapers, either in print journalism or in digital format. I have a long background in journalism, and I was somewhat shocked to realize that very few people care about that form anymore. The majority of our people get their information from other digital sources, such as Instagram, and appear to believe almost anything. I find this disconcerting.

The question becomes, whom can we trust? Whom do we trust? Who is telling us falsehoods for their own aggrandizement, like the Pharisee, and who is presenting information honestly and humbly, like the Tax Collector? In our present world, the airways are full of vastly differing opinions, agendas, motives, political views, and beliefs. Who indeed can we trust to tell us the truth? Is there any certainty anymore?

Would humility bring us closer to reality? In the past few years, I have had to turn loose of my own certainty that I know much of anything. Instead of insisting "This is right!" I am more likely to say, "What do I know?" That is probably not very helpful for some of you, if you would like to regard me as an authority figure, but it is honest. I often really don't know.

We probably all have the Pharisee and the Tax Collector within ourselves. The Pharisee in me would love to be sure, but the Tax Collector in me knows that I can only rely on God. I suspect that it is rather dangerous in today's world to insist on our own righteousness and to disparage the views of others.

I like that phrase: Fully Rely on God. Many people, trying to find their way through the uncertainties of life, have made an acronym of the phrase: Fully Rely On God, FROG, or frog – you know, the little green amphibians that bounce around. MJ Maling brought us a whole pile of little frog figurines a couple of years ago. She had found that the

uncertainties in her own family were best negotiated by this little reminder to Fully Rely on God. I think it is our best bet!