

Wednesday Reflection

Title: Genuine and Faux Religion 2
Date: October 26, 2025
ID: 30th Sunday of the Year (C cycle)
Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

All years mentioned are in the common era or CE. BCE=before the common era; CE=the common era. They are replacing BC/AD.

I borrowed from Joel B. Green. The Gospel of Luke. William Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997.

Text: Let's start with the time when Luke wrote his Gospel. Scholars debate whether Luke is the third or fourth gospel written. If third, Luke wrote about the time Matthew did in 85. If fourth, Luke wrote between 90 and 100. It's hard to think Luke was recalling an argument between Jesus and Pharisees fifty-five to seventy years earlier. Could it be that the two types of people—the Pharisee and the tax collector—are two types of Christians? Are the Pharisee and tax collector expressions of Luke's concern about genuine and faux religion, between self-righteous religion that judges and excludes and a contrite religion that finds itself in solidarity with the human family, united in need of God's mercy?

Luke places the event in the Temple. The Romans destroyed that sacred space in 70. The memory of it remained active in their imaginations. Scholar Joel Green wrote that the Temple was not only a holy place; it was a cultural center. It modeled the order of Jewish society through a layout of courts that segregated Jews from Gentiles, men from women, clean from unclean, priests from non-priests (p. 646). Sacred spaces have spiritual and psychological impact. The Temple provided the context for a divisive, judgmental prayer: "I thank you [God] that I am not like the rest of humanity" (18:11). Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus taught genuine faith: "Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.... For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you" (6:37-38). The Pharisee was not honest with God. Outwardly, he was wonderful; internally, he was full of contempt.

The tax collector stood off at a distance. He bowed his head to God. His was an honest self-assessment. His was a genuine faith. Missing is self-aggrandizement; gone is all judgment. Social boundaries and divisions disappear. Being honest with God lets one see oneself as one is.

Two lessons are worthy of our meditation: (1) Grace flows like water to the lowest point. St. Paul wrote: "Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more" (Romans 5:20). The flow of grace can lift the worst sinner to new life. The tax collector went home justified (18:14). And (2) Luke's reversal is not only political and economic—the powerful replaced by the lowly, the rich replaced by the poor. The reversal is also spiritual. Jesus says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (18:14). In a couple verses, Jesus informs us how this can happen: "What is impossible for human beings is possible for God" (18:27). Genuine faith reflects a merciful God.