

**Things are not always as they seem.** In the Fall of 1994, I was a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student at Ambrose University— studying to be a pastor—and that Fall, a new student enrolled; for the sake of anonymity, I'll refer to him as John. There was quite the buzz about John because he had played basketball for a highly touted college in Montreal and our basketball team needed all the help they could get.

Everyone liked John, right from the start. He was confident, funny, and charismatic; with no time at all John was one of us. As the year progressed, John joined the basketball team but his skills weren't nearly as sharp as everyone had hoped; unfortunately, he didn't make our team any better. And to add insult to injury, our basketball team experienced a series of thefts in the locker room...wallets and other valuables were stolen.

But if our team's on-court struggles wasn't exactly newsworthy, something happened to John off-court that was. During the second semester, John received an internal letter in his mailbox—from a fellow student—that was filled with racial slurs. This letter sent shockwaves throughout our community.

We had a school wide meeting, where the President of our College the school read us the riot act—and rightly so—there's no room for racism at any school, let alone a Christian school. The President asked individuals to come forward if they knew anything about the letter, but no one came forward. The entire community came around John, to comfort and encourage; after all, John was one of us.

Over the next week or so, John received another letter, and then another. John was heartsick, and so was our community. None of us would have blamed John if he packed up and left and within the next

few weeks, John did end up leaving the school, but not in the way you might think—John was **asked** to leave.

Unbeknownst to us—and to John—after the first hate-letter, the Administration installed a video camera above the mailboxes. It turns out that the letters John received were penned by his own hand; he slipped it into his own mailbox when he thought no one was looking. The Administration did a little more digging and discovered that John hadn't played basketball at the Montreal College. Further still, when they searched his room, they found the wallets and valuables that had been stolen from the basketball team.

**Things are not always as they seem.**

Have you ever been surprised by someone or something? Of course you have—we've all been surprised. Ironically, being surprised, shouldn't come as a surprise, because in every situation there is much more going on than we can see, know, or understand.

As you read through the Gospel accounts, on two or three occasions, we read about Jesus being genuinely surprised. And on each occasion, what surprised Jesus was a particular person displaying remarkable faith. But far more often in the Gospels, Jesus is the one doing the surprising. We see Jesus doing surprising things; we hear Jesus saying surprising things.

And the people Jesus surprised the most, tended to be the people who were considered the most spiritual—people who were looked up to, people who seemed to have God, and life, all figured out. This morning I want to read a story that Jesus once told; this parable holds out two kinds of spirituality—the one is bankrupt while the other

leads to life. If you've got a Bible with you, I'd encourage you to turn with me to Luke 18:9-14. I've got the text on the screen behind me, and when I get to the words written in blue, please read them aloud with me.

*"9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Jesus is the Master Story-Teller and He used stories to teach profound truths about God, what it means to be human, and how align our life with God's life. Jesus didn't tell stories primarily to entertain or to educate, but to expose what was in His listeners' hearts, and, to evoke a response. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will the very same in us this morning.

**Unmasking the Characters:** In order to understand what Jesus wants to expose, and what kind of response He is calling for, we need to unmask the characters in this parable.

Unfortunately, none of us were born in 1st century Palestine, and so we tend to bring our own meaning to this story; in doing so, it's easy to miss what Jesus intended. When we hear the word "Pharisee," we've been conditioned to think of a legalistic, self-righteous, hypocrite—the kind of person that no one likes. At the same time, we tend to think about tax collectors as well-meaning folks who were just doing their job. But viewing the characters in this way completely misses the point Jesus is making.

The Pharisees were **the** pictures of godliness in their day, much like we might esteem a Billy Graham or a Mother Theresa today. And Jewish tax collectors were seen as traitors to their own people—taxing fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman government; they were masters of extortion. They had a financial quota to fill and they got to keep whatever "extra" money they could squeeze out of people; history tells us they took full advantage. As you can imagine, people hated tax collectors.

Jesus told a parable a Pharisee and a tax collector and the surprising part is that the Pharisee was shown to be lacking and the tax collector was the one who received God's blessing. This parable lays out two kinds of spirituality—one aligns us to God, and one doesn't. First, let's look at the Pharisee's spirituality.

**Pharisee Spirituality:** It's no surprise that we find a Pharisee in the Temple praying; Pharisees loved God and wanted to please Him. But in the telling of this story, Jesus exposed their tendency—and ours—to settle for an external spirituality. Allow me to offer a few observations:

- **Pharisee spirituality is frequently self-focussed.** Vs. 9 tells us that Jesus spoke this parable for the sake of those who “*were confident of their own righteousness;*” take a look at the Pharisee’s prayer in verse 11. One can’t help but notice that the word “I” is firmly planted in the centre. One author comments on this prayer saying, “[The Pharisee] glances at God, but contemplates himself”.<sup>1</sup>

Other than the opening word, God is neither mentioned, nor addressed. In fact, this “non-prayer” sounds a lot like many celebrity acceptance speeches. *First of all, I’d like to thank God, for how great I am, and for all of you finally recognizing my greatness...thank you for this award that I clearly deserve.*”

- Pharisee spirituality is self-focussed, and second, **it compares itself against the performance of others.**

The Pharisee uses tax collectors, robbers, and adulterers as his measuring stick; since he wasn’t guilty of their sins, he considered himself exempt from God’s judgment, and more, he assumed he was capable to judge others on God’s behalf. Comparison often leads to pride, and pride to self-love—and when you’re in love with yourself, no one else measures up.

All of us face temptation to Pharisee living. Those who are strong, popular, or highly skilled are tempted to pride, comparison, and contempt. And those who are most humble among us are also tempted to pride, comparison, and contempt. The difference is, the

humble person is tempted to take pride in their humility, and so, they too, judge.

There’s a simple test to discern whether you suffer from Pharisee spirituality. If at any point in the last few minutes you’ve said to yourself, “*Thank God, I’m not like that Pharisee,*” then you’re infected.

And there’s one final observation I’d like to make:

- Pharisee spirituality **majors on the external but ignores the internal.**

*I don’t steal, do evil, or commit adultery—**check, check, check.** I pray, fast twice a week, and tithe (even from my herb garden)—**check, check, check.***

Pharisee spirituality dismisses the importance of the heart. *Well, technically I didn’t kill the guy, I just wanted him dead in my heart. I didn’t steal her nice clothes, or car, or life, I just covet them every day. I’ve never slept with anyone outside of marriage, I just undress people in my mind.*

Pharisee spirituality is a dis-integrated spirituality; the head and heart are disconnected, and so too, life with God is disconnected from life with one another. If we can move from praising God, to telling our neighbour to “*Go to hell,*” something is broken.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke*, 290.

Jesus calls us to an integrated spirituality that works from the inside out, and He uses the unlikely example of a tax collector to show us the way.

**Inside Out Spirituality:** I mean, who knew that tax collectors even prayed? Jesus exposes our prejudices. Some of the people we might consider far from God are much closer than we think—not only do they pray, but when they pray in humility, God listens and answers.

- **Inside out spirituality prefers to gaze at God ahead of self.** Like the Pharisee, they engage in comparison but they compare themselves by the only standard that counts—God Himself. Verse 13 tells us that the tax collector was so convinced of his unworthiness before God that he refused to even look toward heaven. He called himself what he is—what we all are—a sinner.

The self-righteous Pharisee asked for nothing, and got nothing from God. The tax collector asked for mercy and God poured it out. Jesus once said, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit”*. Why? Because those who recognize their own spiritual poverty—those who know they have nothing to offer God but themselves—get in on what God offers: mercy, transformation, freedom. The one who exalts herself will experience a humbling, but the one who humbles herself will experience the mercy and favour of God.

- **Inside Out Spirituality is also concerned with the integration of the internal and the external.** Again and again, what Jesus confronts in Pharisee Spirituality is this technical righteousness—living to the letter of the law, but forgetting about the spirit of it. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, *“The Lord does not look at the things people*

*look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”*

Humility, repentance, and love are matters of the heart that then express themselves in action—this is what Jesus wants to produce in us. Now don’t get me wrong, Jesus is after obedience too. Notice that Jesus doesn’t condemn the Pharisee for his tithing or fasting; in the same way, Jesus doesn’t condone the tax collector for heavy-handed extortion. But what Jesus does through this parable is **expose** our tendency to simply check boxes; what He wants to do is bring alignment between our behaviour and our desires.

- And finally, Inside Out Spirituality **connects life with God to our life with others.**

The Pharisee prayed regularly, fasted twice a week, and even tithed from his herb garden but his heart remained proud and judgmental. Praying should lead to a greater confidence in God’s presence, and a greater assurance of His love for us. Fasting should expose our self-reliance and lead to a greater dependence on God. Tithing should lead to joy, trust, and greater generosity.

When our spiritual practices lead to pride, or contempt for others, something is wrong. And likely there is nothing wrong with the practice itself—in other words, don’t stop praying, fasting, or giving—instead, recognize that no practice can transform us, we need Christ to change our desires from the inside out.

**Application:** If you have ears to hear, then hear what the Spirit is saying to you this morning.

Are you thinking a lot about yourself? Are you comparing yourself to the performance of others, only to be driven towards pride (or despair)? Has following Jesus become a matter of checking the right boxes, or is He transforming your behaviour *and* your desires?

**illus:** The message I'm preaching this morning has a particular relevance to my own life these days; like you, I too am on a journey with Jesus. Recently I met with my spiritual director and was pouring out my heart to him, recounting the ways in which I saw myself falling short of Jesus' example.

He let me go on and on for a long time, and when I had finally exhausted myself, he said something unexpected and life-giving. He said, "*Mark, it sounds to me like you are obsessed with thinking about yourself, and it's leading you to despair. Instead of spending so much time thinking about all that you are not, wouldn't you rather think about Jesus? About how great He is? About how loving He is? About how present He is to you?*"

I laughed out loud. I wasn't laughing at him, or what he said, it was the laughter that comes from joy. Jesus is great! Jesus is loving! Jesus is present with me! Isn't that good news?! All that I am, all that I am not, all that I will ever be, belongs to Him. We're never going to transform ourselves, but as we walk with Him, and listen to Him, He will lead us to life.

As we enter this New Year, I want to invite you to join me in turning your mind, your desires, and your feet toward Jesus, so that He can lead us. Let's commit once again to being works **in progress**. Let's humble our hearts before God and one another. And let's ask

the Father, to send the Spirit, to unite us to Jesus. We all need Jesus, don't we?

**Prayer:** As I conclude, I want to invite you to bow your head with me and open your heart to the Lord Jesus in prayer. I trust that already, Jesus has been speaking to you. And I want to give you some moments to respond to Him. If you need to ask for mercy, then ask. If you need to repent, then repent. Listen to His voice, and then do what He says and you will be well on your way. And then, after a few minutes, I will conclude in prayer.

### **Song of Response**

#### **Brendan's Ordination**

- **Ordination Perspectives - Dwayne (7 mins)**
- **Charge to Brendan (3 min):** Lawyers article and then write the B.A.R exam before they are admitted to the fellowship of lawyers. Doctors have residency followed by a comprehensive exam. And pastors have ordination. Brendan, the last few years you have written theological papers, you've submitted your sermons for review, you've studied, you've been examined and you've been approved. Ordination is the public affirmation of your calling, skills, and gifts for pastoral ministry.

That's what ordination is, but this is what it means. It means that you have been set apart, by God, our elders, and this community to be a shepherd. It means that you have a high and noble calling, to love, to nurture, to teach, and to equip the people of God. It means that God has sent you to be a gift in our community.

Brendan you love people. I've seen firsthand how you love Emily, Devon, and Nathan; I've seen your love for your Youth Leaders and High School Students. I've also seen your passion to know, obey, and teach God's Word. Brendan you have leadership gifts that you've been using to serve this community by leading them to Jesus and I commend you for all that you have doing.

But pastoral ministry has less to do with what you can accomplish and more to do with who you are and what, by the grace of God, you will become. The most important thing you can offer isn't your gifts—it's a life lived with God.

And so, in the sight of God, and these witnesses, I charge you Brendan, *"just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your life in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness...For in Christ all the fullness of [God] lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness."*<sup>2</sup>

Brendan, at times you will be tempted at times to think that pastoral ministry is your gift to God but the reverse is true—it is God's gift to you. Pastoral ministry will keep you humble, dependent, and listening—to God and to others. You will discover again and again that you don't have all the answers, that you can't solve people's problems, or heal all that hurts.

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:6-7, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 6:24-26.

And this reality will keep you connected to Jesus, it will keep you pointing others to Jesus instead of pointing to yourself. Jesus is the True Vine and you are a branch, and as you remain connected to Jesus, your life and your ministry will bear much fruit. Brendan, pastoral ministry will put you on the front lines of brokenness, the place where people's sorrow and Christ's mercy meets. And that's where you want to be—that's where all the action is.

Brendan, *"May the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."*<sup>3</sup>

- **Prayer (Including Staff, Elders, & Youth Leaders) - Dave - 9am / Michael Dick - 11am (2 mins)**
- **Presentation & Introduction - Dwayne (1 min)**
- **Response - Brendan (2 mins)**