

Antidote to Polarisation

(The Pharisee and the Tax Collector)

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Series: Stories along the Way (Parables in Luke)

Texts: Luke 18:9-14; Psalm 32; Romans 3:21-26

In March 2019, Tim Dixon, former speechwriter and economic adviser to Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, [delivered a public lecture](#) at NSW Parliament House titled, “Crossing the Great Divide: Building bridges in an age of tribalism”.

Dixon spoke of the toxic public discourse that is increasingly commonplace, intensifying and driving us apart. He cited the psychologist John Gottmann, famous for his work in marriage counselling. According to Gottmann, contempt is one of what he calls the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse for a marriage. Left unchecked, contempt eats away at the relationship. Dixon argues that what is true for marriages is true for society. When opponents view each other with contempt, society is in trouble.

Across the Western world we’re entering dangerous waters as public contempt for others becomes commonplace. Contempt across the spectrum is exploited by authoritarian populists. One only needs to think of how Hillary Clinton’s describing Trump’s supporters as “deplorables” cost her the election. Contempt leads to distrust of neighbours and institutions. We retreat to tribes of like-minded people for safety. These tribes increasingly live in different moral and linguistic universes. For the politically engaged the other side can no longer be tolerated. No price is too high for their defeat.

The pandemic has shown that we are not as far down that road of distrust and polarisation as our cousins in the US or the UK. But we can see it on the horizon. In that speech Tim Dixon warned that, “for many people, it’s just a short path from contempt to acting out violence”. He couldn’t have known how true his words would prove to be. Just 2 days later an Australian white supremacist massacred 51 muslims at prayer in Christchurch, New Zealand. Dixon says those words have haunted him ever since.

Of course the things which different tribes are defending are almost always a good thing in and of themselves. The problem comes when that good thing becomes a source of pride that leads you to despise those who don’t hold that good in the same way or who are simply different. Love of one’s country and culture is a good thing. But that can metastasize into contempt for other people who look different from you. Likewise care for the environment,

refugees, the marginalised is a good thing. But there's something wrong when advocacy for those causes leads you to despise those who don't share them.

Vigorously pursuing the goods of our tribe can come to be core to how we see ourselves. Our sense of self can be bound up in how well we perform the morality of our tribe. We can pursue those causes to hide our self centredness and make atonement for our failings in other areas. We cast the spotlight on our successes and the failures of our opponents. Our identity comes to be defined in opposition. We become blind to our failures and the humanity of those who aren't like us.

Western societies are increasingly diverse. Critical to our flourishing and health as a society is how we navigate that diversity and foster civic harmony. How can we live in harmony with those who are different from us? How can we avoid being drawn into the culture wars and step out of polarisation? I don't have a policy prescription. I leave that to folks like Tim Dixon. But the place to start is with me and you and our church family. Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector shows us the way forward. We'll look at both characters and with them the Diagnosis and the Cure. So let's have a look at the text.

Diagnosis - Pride

Read with me verse 9.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

Luke puts the diagnosis of the problem front and centre. On the one hand there is an overweening pride. The word translated "confident" literally means "trust". The Pharisee's prayer shows the kind of righteousness that he was trusting in: his moral performance. That trust in the good things that you do spill over into a sense of moral superiority. The word translated as "looked down on" could also be translated as "despised" or "had contempt for". It's lifting yourself up by pushing others down. To these kind of people Jesus tells this parable:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The setting for the story is 2 men going to the temple to pray. The word pray is synonymous with worship. What kind of public worship service are they going to? There was a daily service in the temple at dawn and 3pm. Here outside the sanctuary at the great high altar a lamb was sacrificed for the sins of the people and its blood was sprinkled on the altar. The officiating priest would then enter the outer part of the sanctuary where he would offer incense. At the point when the priest went inside the gathered worshippers would offer their prayers to God. We see this at the beginning of Luke's gospel with Zechariah serving

in the temple. So it was at one of these daily services with a sacrifice of atonement that these 2 men went to the temple to pray.

The Pharisee's words and actions betray him. He stands apart by himself, to ensure that he is touched by the great unwashed. He's more concerned about the possibility of others making him unclean than reflecting on the sins of his own heart. Jewish custom was that prayer would be said out loud, so everyone can hear what he says, and it seems like his prayer is for his own and their benefit:

The Pharisee stood up by himself and prayed: God, I thank you that I'm not like other people - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all that I get.

Fasting and tithing are clear signs of deep religious devotion. My kids tell me that the Pharisees are always the bad guys, and you'd be forgiven for getting that impression when you read the gospels. But the Pharisees weren't bad, they were good. Really good.

Scrupulously good. They were deeply devoted to God. And they showed that devotion in an exacting obedience to his laws. They put a fence of other laws around God's law so that they wouldn't come close to breaking his laws. They were good, upstanding pillars of society. Everyone knew that. Their closest equivalent today is the church, churches that care about the authority of the Bible and personal holiness.

But Jesus clearly has these kind of morally upright people in his sights. Why? The Pharisee's words show that his keeping all the rules lead him to despise those who don't. *God, I thank you that I'm not like other people - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector.*

This is where we get the idea of self-righteousness and hypocrisy that are so associated with the Pharisees. The good works are not the problem. It's what's going on inside that is the issue. And Luke names it - *trusting in your own righteousness*. That is looking to your moral performance, the good things you do for your standing with God. It's actually a form of self-centredness and pride. It's a way of being your own saviour and Lord.

You see you can be self-centred and proud and so far away from God in two ways. One is by breaking all the rules, saying, "I am going to live my life the way I want". The second is by obeying all the rules, and trusting that that is why God will accept you. Both avoid trusting Jesus as Saviour. Self salvation through good works may produce a great deal of good works - but on the inside you'll be filled with self-righteousness, cruelty, contempt and you'll be miserable. You'll be insecure and judgmental, always comparing yourself to other people and never sure you're good enough while you crush them in your pride.

On the surface it looks like Jesus has what we might call conservative morally upright people in mind. And when we are like this as the church we are deeply unattractive. There

was a famous Sunday School lesson on this parable. To finish the lesson the teacher said, “Now kids, let’s pray and thank God that we’re not like the Pharisee.” The truth is we tend to make that prayer. We can see that if we translate the Pharisees words into the moral language of our different tribes. “I thank God that I’m not like those immoral, godless, Cultural Marxists. I work hard. I pay my taxes. I give to charity.” It’s no worse than, “I thank God I’m not like those self righteous, homophobic, racist, bigots. I’ve gone plastic free. I demand Climate Action. Black lives do matter. I volunteer at the women’s refuge.” The moral compass different, but they are both fruit of the same spiritual problem: that our hearts are proud. That we’re afraid of being found out as frauds and so we push those we disagree with down to lift ourselves up. Ultimately that we trust in ourselves rather than trusting in God.

Cure - Mercy

How can we get out of this mess? If pride is the disease, what can cure our hearts? Let’s have a look at the Tax Collector. In Jesus’ day tax collectors were complete social outcasts and for reasons that would see them rejected by the left and right today. They became wealthy through collaboration with the imperial power of Rome. They weren’t patriots but traitors. When collecting taxes they used Romans soldiers to extort their fellow countrymen and line their own pockets. They exploited the poor. It’s this kind of man who comes to the temple, seeking God.

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.” He stands at a distance because he knows he will be shunned by everyone else. He knows he hasn’t got a leg to stand on before God. There is nothing he can bring to twist God’s arm to bless him, to answer his prayers, to accept him. All he can do is be honest with God about his failures and cast himself on God’s mercy. And Jesus says, *I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.* What does that word *justified* mean? It’s actually the verb form of the word righteousness we read in verse 9. It means to be put in the right with God. To be declared not guilty. To be accepted and welcomed home.

How is it that Jesus can say that this scoundrel, this extortioner and collaborator who has lined his own pockets by robbing from his own flesh and blood, can go home in the right with God? The answer is in that little word, mercy. The word Jesus uses is not the usual word for mercy, but a very specific word - *hilastheti*. Elsewhere in the Bible the word is translated as “make atonement” or as “a sacrifice of atonement”. This is the basis upon which God can be merciful. The Tax Collector, looking at the sacrifice on the altar, beats his breast and cries out on God to accept that atonement on his behalf. This is the word that Paul uses in our reading from Romans -

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. ..., 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.

What the Tax Collector could only hope for as he looked at the blood of the lamb on the altar, God has done once and for all through Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross. He humbled himself to give his life in our place on the cross that we might be put right with God, accepted by him and exalted to a place in the family.

I speak to lots of people who think being a Christian is all about being a good person. In a sea of uncertainty and change they find Christian morals attractive and stable. Jesus does teach us how to live, but first and foremost and underpinning everything being a Christian is about trusting Jesus and his death for you. Only then do we look to him as our example and helper. We're not accepted because we obey. We obey because we're accepted. It's that encounter with Jesus that changes us from the inside out. Just like the tax collector Zaccacheus in Luke 19. Jesus' acceptance is life changing.

For those of you weighed down by guilt and feeling you are standing far off. Come to Jesus. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He will hear your cry for mercy. Jesus has borne your guilt to put you in the right with God.

The truth of this parable is that all of us are the Pharisee. Until we recognise our pride we'll continue to despise others. But Jesus calls all of us to God like the Tax Collector. Let go of your pride. Stop trying to justify yourself. There is nothing you can do for God to accept you. Jesus has already done it. He is the *hilasterion*, the sacrifice in your place that brings you home to God. Stop trusting yourself. Trust him as your saviour.

It's only by trusting in Jesus and his death for us on the cross that we will find the antidote to the pride that polarises. The cross crucifies our pride because it tells us that we were so sinful that Jesus had to die for us. But it exalts us to the skies because it says that he was glad to die for us. And so Jesus can say that,

All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.
When you have the unshakeable assurance of the cross that you are accepted and loved by God, then you will no longer need to push others down and lift yourself up. You'll be able to step down and lift others up. It's only as you accept Jesus as Saviour that you'll be able to follow his example of humility because you won't be doing so out of fear or guilt or pride. And that is what our divided world so desperately needs.

