

## Good Guys and Bad Guys

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*Luke 18:9-14 — He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Many of our favorite stories have a good guy and a bad guy, a protagonist and an antagonist, cut-and-dried, easily identified. From comic books, with a superhero versus a villain; to Disney movies, with a princess versus a witch; to Bible stories, with the Israelites versus the Canaanites; to our water cooler talk, with me versus my boss. We have been conditioned to tell these stories and to want these stories, both fiction and non-fiction. We want someone we can cheer for without any qualms, and we want someone we can boo at without being empathetic. So, when something happens that makes our chosen good guy or good girl look bad, or our chosen bad guy or bad girl look good, we ignore it or downplay it — and understandably so: life is just so much easier when you’ve got clear, consistent protagonists and antagonists.

But Jesus isn’t here to make our lives easier. In telling this parable, he knows his audience well, who they’re rooting for and who they’re booing at, and he’s out to shake things up a bit. We’ve talked about tax collectors in weeks past, so just to refresh your memory: during Jesus’ time, the region of Palestine, where most Jews lived, was occupied by the oppressive Roman Empire, and tax collectors were those Jews who collected taxes for the empire, so they were working for a foreign power, colluding with the enemy. What’s worse, they were known for charging their countrymen more than was necessary and then keeping the change for themselves. They were thieves and traitors — an easily identified bad guy.

Pharisees, on the other hand, were the opposite of tax collectors: they were upstanding, admirable people of faith. In modern times, we are so used to reading negative descriptions of the Pharisees in the bible that we forget why people were drawn to them in the first place. The Pharisees emerged about 150 years before Jesus’ time, when Jews were suffering horrendous persecution. In trying to make sense of *why* they were suffering, some Jews concluded that their nation must not be sufficiently obeying the Torah, the Jewish law. Thus, these people insisted that the law, and every detail of the law, must be strictly observed. Before a messiah would come and liberate them from Roman rule, Jews had to start practicing righteousness. For the Pharisees, this meant separating themselves from those who were obviously unrighteous. The name “Pharisee” means “separated one,” in fact. This separation was not simply for the sake of being

better than everyone else, but for the sake of their nation's survival. Pharisees believed that the success of the Jewish people depended on their piety. Because of this belief, some Pharisees would go above and beyond what the law required as a way of compensating for those who were more lax. Actually, this seems to be what's happening in the parable that Jesus tells. The Pharisee says in his prayer that he fasts twice a week, although the law only required fasting once a year, and he says that he tithes a tenth of all of his income, although the law only required a tenth of some forms of income, such as one's crops.

So, from the perspective of Jesus' original audience, the Pharisees are the good guys, the ones who are living rightly, the ones who are picking up the slack of all the sinners around. Perhaps we Christians have been too harsh on them. Looking back at our first reading from 2 Timothy, I can imagine a Pharisee writing these words: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day." But there's an interesting catch in this passage: this crown of righteousness isn't given to those who have lived righteously, as we might assume; rather, according to 2 Timothy, it's given "to all who have longed for Christ's appearing." Isn't that interesting? The crown of righteousness isn't given to people because they have acted righteously, but because they have longed for Christ.

In Jesus' parable, longing is the essence of the tax collector's prayer. He simply cries out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" In contrast, the Pharisee's prayer lacks even a trace of longing for God — and I might suggest that longing for God is what makes a prayer a prayer. If you don't feel or will any such longing, then you're probably not actually praying. Instead of praying, then, it seems that the Pharisee is simply reciting his religious credentials and noting that they far exceed those of the guy back there. But what the Pharisee regards as excess is actually a deficiency. The very fact that he is so confident in his moral superiority renders his faith inferior to that of the sinner back there.

So then, in this parable, the good-guy-Pharisee is portrayed as a bad guy, and the bad-guy-tax-collector is portrayed as a good guy. What exactly makes someone a good guy, and what makes someone a bad guy? According to this parable, those who feel certain of their correctness or their purity, those who think of themselves as deserving God's favor over and against others, they are not justified in the eyes of God; whereas those who feel true repentance, those who acknowledge their shortcomings and strive to make changes, they are declared by God to be righteous. In telling this parable, Jesus' point isn't that the Pharisees are the *real* bad guys, and the tax collectors are the *real* good guys; rather, Jesus' point is that *anyone* can be a good guy, and *anyone* can be a bad guy, everyone can be an admirable or a condemnable person, on any given day, depending on our posture, on how we carry ourselves before God and before others. Most days, I expect, we won't be quite as self-righteous as this Pharisee, but we will often lean that way, more so than the way of humility. And when we find ourselves leaning towards self-righteousness, let us remind ourselves that God desires our repentance more than our perfection.

At the beginning of the sermon, I mentioned that many of our favorite stories have a clear protagonist and a clear antagonist. In recent years, though, Hollywood has been wising up, and there are at least two very popular Disney movies that have broken away from this norm. How many of you have seen the movie *Frozen*? How many of you have seen the movie *Inside Out*? Part of what makes these two movies so brilliant, I think, is that neither of them has a villain, a standard antagonist. In *Frozen*, the antagonist is fear, primarily fear of difference and fear of loss, and these fears surface in various characters at various points in the story. In *Inside Out*, the antagonist is the suppression of one's own emotions, primarily the unwillingness to accept so-called "negative" emotions, like sadness and anger. And lemme tell you, *all* of us have this villain inside of us. Your homework this week is to go watch these great movies and think about this. But for now, let's try to step away from the good guy vs. bad guy mentality. We have all been Pharisees, and we have all been tax collectors. We are all justified not by ourselves, but by the God of love. And that God loves, perfectly and equally, both those we cheer on and those we boo at. Amen.