

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I 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.”

If the presidential candidates are in a church of their own denominations this morning they will hear these words: He also told this parable to some who trusted that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. A parable told to those who trust that they themselves are righteous and regard others with contempt.

Every person in the United States that has been listening at all has been learning that the way to win in this land is to declare that you yourself are righteous and to pour out contempt for your opponent. On TV, the radio, on the internet, in conversations over meals and coffee contempt has spewing forth. The label evil has been plastered all over the image of the opposition.

Maybe you and I have escaped such behavior, priding ourselves that we are balanced and fair in our assessments, and not like those talk show hosts and politicians. Yes, Jesus told this parable to those who trust that they themselves are righteous and regard others with contempt.

What do you think? Will the candidates or you or I be changed by Jesus' word this day? Or will Jesus continue to be a failure when it comes to really shaping human lives?

Let's look at the parable Jesus told to some who trusted that they themselves 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.

First the Pharisee. Both the Democrats and the Republicans would love to have this guy in their camp. A big giver, honest, no ghosts in his closet, no affairs or divorces to mar his pedigree – were he to walk in here this morning and want to join this church the council would hold a special meeting and waive the requirement that he take a new member class. Why we would even create an extra council position so he could join the leadership right now.

And the tax collector? Imagine a person who has been sexually abusing his nieces and nephews, selling crack to elementary students, buying favors from politicians for his shady construction company. Tax collectors in Jesus' day owed Rome a certain amount – anything more that they could extort was theirs to keep. And you can bet that the rich were not on the receiving end of that extortion – no it was those without power, the ones with no friends in high places to call upon except God. Tax collectors grew rich at the expense of the most vulnerable ones.

So Jesus told his parable about these two – one who would be a candidate for the Man of the Year award and one who in any just society would be in jail.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “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 and I give a tenth of all my income.”

Every word of this prayer was true. And he thanked God – gave God all the credit – all the glory.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” No promise to try harder, to do better, no promise to change – just this plea for mercy.

Jesus said, “I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other.

No wonder they crucified Jesus. This parable is against everything that is true and right and honorable in this world. How can we build a better world unless we recognize excellence? How can we make a better world for our children and our grandchildren unless every preacher and teacher and politician proclaims the necessity of

integrity and clean living? How can we motivate people to do good and be good unless we make it clear the God rewards upright people and punishes evildoers? But Jesus said that it was the man who had not a single virtue to point to who went down to his house justified that day.

Ah, but maybe the reason Jesus said that was because this man was going to change. Sure, that's it. He repents and then he changes to no longer be a thief, a rogue, an adulterer, and a tax collector. Sure, he begins to fast twice each week and to give a tenth of all his income. He becomes exactly like the Pharisee but with a better attitude. Then he would be justified. Really justified.

But that is not the story Jesus told. Jesus did not say, Someday he would be justified, but that day he went down to his house justified.

And you? Will you go down to your apartment or condo or house this day justified – right with God? When God thinks about you this day will there be a big grin on the face of God or will the brow of God be wrinkled with concern? If you think that it is up to you to make yourself into someone who can stand tall before God the furrows concern and sorrow on God's forehead will run deep. "How could you so misunderstand me?" God will lament.

But if you go home this day trusting in a love of God for you that is greater than all else a big grin will be plastered all over the face of God and that grin will be renewed every day as you count on God for everything good.

I hope that the candidates and you go home this day counting on God for everything. Then whether they win or lose we will all be alright.