



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Stereotypes."**  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22  
Second Reading 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18  
Gospel Luke 18:9-14

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"A priest, a minister and a rabbi walk into a bar..."

That might be the beginning of several funny (or perhaps not so funny) stories. The humor depends on our seeing each of the characters as bigger than life: each representing all the good and the bad traits of their race, nationality, or in this case religion. No single, real-life priest, minister or rabbi is being described in the story. If real persons were being described, we'd lose the focus of the story- we'd think about these religious leaders as individuals rather than as larger-than-life symbols of an entire class or type. This oversimplification to tell a story is called a stereotype. Like most vehicles of humor, it can be amusing or hurtful, depending on how it's used and who's using it: like Jesus in today's Gospel.

Indeed, Jesus' story about the Publican and the Pharisee uses stereotype. We are not told that this episode is something that actually happened. In other words, the chances are great that these two characters never existed. But people who are *like* them exist all the time, and that is the point. If Jesus were telling a joke, it would have started, "A tax collector and a Pharisee go into a synagogue..." We would be waiting for the punch line. But Jesus isn't using humor here; he's in fact making a serious point about a person's attitude towards him or herself. Let's look at our stereotypes today:

First, there's the Pharisee. Not a bad man *per se*: a member of a respectable religious party that cherished the Jewish Law. We might call him a Fundamentalist: mightily concerned about following the details of the Bible closely. He makes the point that he follows good business practice, that he is faithful to his wife, that he fasts according to tradition and that he gives away ten percent off his gross income. We have no reason to doubt that all of this is true. It is possible and commendable to do these things. We might even be tempted to admire this paragon of Jewish piety, and we would certainly agree that he comes off a lot better than the second person in our story: the tax collector.

In the Gospel times, the tax collector or publican was not a simple servant of the IRS, Inland Revenue or the BIR. Taxes were collected in the name of the Roman Empire, not the local community. Those who did this job were "local hire" and were hated not only for the financial burden they represented, but more so for the fact that they had betrayed their people and were working for the hated conquerors. (We have seen a similar phenomenon in recent targeting of the US-trained police forces in Iraq.) It is unlikely that any of those working for the Romans could not have found employment elsewhere: no, this man had chosen his profession fully aware of the reaction on the part of his countrymen. It's very possible that he just didn't care; that the pay was too good. For the sake of the story, this is the villain- this is a "bad man."

So there we have them: the two stereotypes, each representing a whole class of people and each meant to be instantly recognized by our Lord's listeners. For them, the most logical, expected, devout thing would be to see the Pharisee as perfectly justified in what he is praying and, equally, to agree with the tax collector that he is, indeed, "a sinner." But Jesus does something quite different with the story.

Jesus takes us into the mind of both of these men and lets us hear their prayers. We hear the Pharisee not only praying to himself, but *selling* himself as well. He feels that he has done the best that anyone could do and that he deserves all that God would naturally and richly bless him with. And the miserable, nasty, turncoat tax

collector just grovels there and keeps on repeating "God, be merciful to me a sinner." That's the trouble.

You see, the Pharisee has made a fatal flaw in his devotional life: he loses focus on himself (believe it or not!) and wanders to the sins of his neighbor. He presumes that the tax collector looks miserable because he deserves to be and that he is getting what he had coming. But Jesus takes a step back from these two and gives us God's point of view. As a good rabbi, a skilled teacher not just of the letter of the Law but also of God's Spirit behind it, Jesus tells us that it is the tax collector whose prayer has been heard because of his honest humility. The Pharisee, convinced that he is in fine shape, has presumed too much. Thus, we are told, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

We've all heard this story many times. I know that when I was a child, hearing this for the first time, I knew who it was that I identified with (or at least who I wanted to): the tax collector. [Of course in those ancient days, using the King James Bible, we called him the 'Publican' which sounded a lot like *Republican*, and with my mother working for Nixon against Kennedy he had to be the good guy!] Years have passed, but it's fair to say that most people still presume to identify with the humble little man against the big, bad establishment type. Our prayer goes something like this:

"Thank you, Lord, for giving me this parable to make me feel good about me. I'm glad that I can be humble and unassuming and to be sorry for my sins, just like the tax collector. Thank you that I am not bigoted, self-satisfied and condescending...like that other guy, the Pharisee." Oooops! Something went wrong there: something that Jesus must have foreseen. Our Lord knew that when we look at this parable closely we get caught in a trap. We identify with the tax collector only so far as he comes out on top. We are still praying not his prayer, but the Pharisee's: the one that got him into trouble. "Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other men," and especially this one right here next to me.

But we are JUST like other men. And that is the problem. Most of us lack the objectivity to look at ourselves honestly and not defensively. We want to justify

ourselves, feel good about ourselves. Usually, that comes at the expense of others, because we just can't seem to avoid the need to be better than they are- happier, luckier, richer, thinner, and probably even holier.

The minute we take our mind off our sins we start to drift into those of others. I can't tell you how many times I've heard confessions that include long passages like "Father, I know I've sinned, but it's all so-and-so's fault!" That doesn't work. Jesus knows that, and so ought we, really.

The point is to keep focused on your own journey. Jesus is not telling us to wallow in our sins all of the time, just to realize how far we still have to go. On the road to perfection, to that place of fulfillment and personal achievement that God calls each of us to and that is made possible by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and His Resurrection to life again, the greatest danger comes from looking sideways on the track and seeing those around us as competition. We are not in a race with others to God, to Paradise, because if and when we get there, we'll just have to wait until the others catch up! Heaven will be a group experience. "God so loved the world that...*all* who believe will have eternal life"...not just individual overachievers.

It is very significant that the tax collector's simple prayer became the basis of one of the most-used devotions in Christendom, the so-called Jesus Prayer. Its most common form is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." It is regularly used by monks and nuns of the Eastern Christian tradition, but it has become more and more popular amongst "non-professional" Christians all over the world. What it does so simply is to recall us to a place deep within where we are no longer concerned about how we rate compared with others, only how we compare with Christ, our ultimate criterion and standard. It is hard to imagine anyone feeling proud at his or her achievement after that comparison. But it is also hard not to imagine Jesus hearing that prayer and saying: "Finally. You have rediscovered who you *are*...and who you are *not*. *Now* we can continue on the path."

Perhaps our stereotypes served a holy purpose after all, and we can let that stereotypical priest, minister and rabbi go on their way into that bar while we continue on our road: humbled, perhaps, but much, much wiser.

