

What Does A Follower Of Jesus Look Like? Childlike, Not Childish

Luke 18:9-17

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I know someone is going to say I quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer too much, but how can we talk about discipleship without listening to him? So sue me! "I detect that a rebellion against all things 'religious' is growing in me. Often it amounts to an instinctive horror. I'm not religious by nature....Authenticity, life...mercy mean a great deal to me. It is just their religious manifestations which are so unattractive" [A Testament of Freedom, p. 499]. This morning we have the hard task of exploring the unattractive side of church that actually makes following Jesus more difficult instead of easier.

But to begin, let's look at the Pharisee's good qualities. He fasts twice a week and tithes on ALL of his income (not a requirement of his day; they only tithed on certain things). So he goes beyond what most Pharisees did. He practices spiritual disciplines.

Now let's look at the tax collector. He isn't really a very nice man. By most accounts in that setting, he's a sleaze bag. He collects taxes for the enemy government. And he can gouge anyone he wants, taking his cut. So long as he gives Rome X amount, they don't care how much he charges. So politically, he is a traitor, religiously, he is unclean and financially, he is a cheat and oppressor of the common people. Get the picture?

Now we are ready to hear each man's confession in worship. Let's listen in. The Pharisee prays, "Lord, I thank you I'm not like those sinners...." Continue reading vv. 11-12. Two major problems to start with. First, he can only feel good about himself by pushing off of other sinners. Remember that Luke says this story is addressed to those of us who despise, disdain or hold in contempt others (v. 9). Second, the man uses the personal pronoun "I" over and over again. Someone has said that his worship is like this: he glances at God but stares at himself!

Now let's listen in on the other man, the tax gatherer (v. 13). He beats his breast, a Jewish action practiced to this day on Yom Kippur, as Jews recite their sins and practice contrition and repentance. He doesn't just confess he has sinned. He acknowledges he is a sinner! And he cries out for mercy. Something is happening here. God has shown up! A real disciple is being birthed. A real follower of Jesus is being created right before our eyes.

I want us to think about the interaction between the two men. Oh, wait! I forgot! There was none! The churchgoer had a chance to help the unchurched. But he chose to focus on himself. How many opportunities are lost by the church to help those at the doorway of faith? Think about this. Elementary school students do not do higher math or calculus. They are learning what the numbers look like and learning to count. Then they learn to add, etc. The tax man wasn't ready for the spiritual disciplines of fasting and tithing. He was coming into the faith. This is how you come

to Christ and become a follower: God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Like this Pharisee, sometimes we church folk get so wrapped up in our church life, we forget that unchurched people are still trying to just connect with God. Someone published "questions visitors to church are not asking that churches are trying to answer anyway:

1. How soon can I get involved in your church committees?
2. Will you please single me out in front of all the people during worship this morning?
3. Will you please send some "callers" by my house and interrupt me while I fix dinner?
4. Does this church have weekly meetings, rehearsals and other activities that will consume most of our family's free time?
5. I need more paperwork! Can you give me a folder filled with pamphlets, old newsletters and statements of faith? ["Ministry Matters," August 13, 2013, in *Christian Century*, Sept. 18, 2013, p. 9].

So here's a way to clarify the differences between the two men in our story. The church-going Pharisee was childISH and the unchurched tax man was (in his moment of confession) childLIKE. Let's explore the childishness of the first man. Mike Lueken has written, "I was disappointed by the 'mature' Christians who acted like spoiled children. I was disappointed with the dog and pony show of large church ministry. I was tired of catering to Christians who loved their weekly church fix but continued to orient their lives around their wants, needs and desires" *Renovation of the Church*, by Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken]. Does the Pharisee get it, that being a disciple is more than showing up at a building once a week? Do we get it?

But in his confession, the other man, the outsider, was not childish, but childlike. He was aware of his need, his lack, his distance from God. Dependence, not pride. And his posture is reinforced by the very next story Luke tells (vv. 15-17). People were bringing babies and children to Jesus and the disciples tried to shoo them away. Jesus said no...this is what the Kingdom looks like. What does a baby have to offer? Skill? Achievement? No. Just need and dependence and openness. They are just delightfully themselves. Henri Nouwen talked about two voices always within him. One voices said to succeed and achieve. The other voice told him he was unconditionally loved and had nothing to prove.

I have to tell you Eugene Peterson's story of Charity, a delightful, verbal, curly-haired five-year-old. One of Charity's grandmothers had spent the week with her. This first grandmother was pretty serious and "correct" in religious matters. About the time she left, the other grandma arrived. On the first morning of the second grandmother's visit, about 5:00am, Charity crawled in bed with Grandma, cuddled up and said, "Grandma, let's not have any godtalk while you're here, OK? I believe that God is everywhere. Let's just get on with life" [The Pastor, Eugene Peterson, p. 240].

Do you hear this little girl contrasting the two men in Jesus' story? Godtalk vs. getting real. Let's get real. Let's follow Jesus. No church for church's sake, but for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of reaching new followers and for the sake of growing followers. Let's get real. Let's follow Jesus.