

Sin of scorn: Luke 18:9-14

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

The first time I heard this parable was as a small child attending vacation Bible school at Pond Fork Baptist Church, where my great-grandparents, great-aunts and grandparents all worshiped. I remember the end of the little curtained balcony where our class was held, sunlight coming into our room rejoicing through a dusty window, the buzzing of insects in the July fields outside, a flannel board with figures stuck on it, and best of all, the anticipation of a story, followed by Kool-Aid and cookies.

And so I listened. There were two grown-ups who went to the temple to pray. One of them was rich and successful, while the other, whom nobody liked, was a tax collector. The rich man, a Pharisee, prayed first, and thanked God that he wasn't a sinner like the tax collector standing next to him, and then he bragged about all the good stuff he had done.

The tax collector went next. When he prayed, he wouldn't even look up at God. Instead, he just stood there banging on his chest and asking God to forgive his sins. God listened to the tax collector's prayer and saved him, but turned his back on the Pharisee, who ended up in hell.

At the end of the story, our teacher asked us questions. What did the one man do wrong and the other do right? What was this story really about?

Whether I answered, I couldn't tell you, but I recall that the message was clear as day. The first man had bragged about himself, refused to confess that he was a terrible sinner, and thought he was better than the tax collector. The second man, our hero, got right down to it. He groveled before God and asked God to forgive him, and God did. The moral of the story, therefore: we all need to admit to God that we are sinners, ask for forgiveness and stop bragging.

I'm not sure I thought about this parable seriously again until I was in seminary and assigned to work a few hours a week at a church. In general, I didn't enjoy what I was doing, which was to help with the youth group. I was an introvert, and I was too close to my own high school days when I had felt like a nerdy social outcast.

My low point came on the day I had to fill in for the absent teacher of the Sunday school class for the teen-agers' parents, a bunch of grown-ups who were powerful, outspoken and of a very different persuasion than I when it came to politics and religion.

I didn't expect trouble. But the class was a disaster. It opened with a prayer led by the class president, a self-confident, obviously successful man. Then I began to read: "Two men went up to the temple to pray . . ."

The reading ended in chaos. Apparently there were people there who had not heard it before. "What do you mean, 'one went home justified and the other did not'?" demanded someone. "Didn't the Pharisee do all those good things? Are you telling us they don't count for anything with God?" another challenged. "And that tax collector," someone else added. "Did I hear you say that God doesn't judge sin?"

I can't remember much of what I answered that day. I tried to make it clear that I hadn't made the story up, but I don't recall if I said anything about recognizing ourselves to be sinners, or bragging, or looking down on anybody. What I do remember is that the class complained about me the next day, and I ended up never wanting to work in a church again.

In spite of my humiliation and anger, however, I could not avoid tucking their basic questions into the back of my mind. What had the Pharisee actually done to make God reject him? How did God look upon his failure to admit his sin and his apparent bragging about his good deeds?

These questions remained lodged there for many years until I ran into an exposition of the parable in a sixth-century homily by the great monastic teacher Dorotheos of Gaza, which he preached to men in his community who apparently were making everybody miserable by inflicting a lot of self-righteousness and judgmentalism upon each other.

Surprisingly, he did not use it to make his monks stop bragging, ignore their own good deeds and acknowledge that they were sinners. Dorotheos said that the Pharisee was doing the right thing when he thanked God for giving him the ability to do good—as should they (the monks) themselves. The Pharisee only did one thing wrong: he passed judgment on the whole person of the tax collector and with scorn dismissed him and his whole life as worthless.

I still find Dorotheos's reading of this parable to be riveting. Like his monks, we too live in a world of scorching, escalating, judgmental scorn—our own and others'—that is grinding us all down to the bone. As Christians, how can we ever escape it? Perhaps we need not so much to quit bragging about our goodness and admit that we are sinners, as to give up the whole question of whether any of us are sinners. (I suspect that if I can acknowledge and learn to thank God when I am able to do something good, I will not have to demonstrate my worth to myself by despising those whose lives look very different from mine.)

"There is no other sin than that of being scornful," one of the desert Abbas used to say. As Dorotheos suggests, allowing ourselves to experience gratitude to God for the good we can do may truly provide some healing for our scornful souls.