One-upmanship: Luke 18:9-14

by Audrey West in the October 16, 2007 issue

"I'm bigger than you are!" Here comes the playground taunt and its implied claim for absolute superiority. Never mind that several classmates are better at kickball or smarter in the classroom, or know how to care for younger siblings, or play the trumpet with exquisite skill. The ultimate measure has been applied and others are found wanting. Fast-forward a few years and the words might change, but not their inherent message: I make more money or drive a better car. I attend the biggest church in town or work harder, get better grades or live in a nicer neighborhood. I am more open-minded or more frugal or volunteer more often. No question: I am the better person, and I have the statistics to prove it.

It is everywhere, this propensity for comparison and judgment. Our culture encourages it.

When Jesus launches into the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we take the bait and do a quick reckoning of the characters' respective worth. *Two men went up to the Temple to pray*, *one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector*. Before hearing the rest of the story, we know which of the characters we should identify with, and it is certainly not the Pharisee. Nearly 20 centuries of interpretation have taught the church that Pharisees were self-righteous legalists who opposed Jesus at nearly every turn. Even when readers know this traditional interpretation to be historically inaccurate, they recall that Jesus often flips conventional wisdom in his parables; thus, even though tax collectors were outcasts in their own day, they are much more to our spiritual liking than are Pharisees. This particular tax collector recognizes that God's grace exceeds his ability to earn it, so he places himself under God's mercy. Yes, we say, we are like the tax collector, not like the Pharisee.

And yet. The story is told of two pastors who fall to their knees at the front of the church, crying out to God, saying, "I have sinned. I am unworthy, I am unworthy." Just then the janitor walks in, and observing their display of piety he joins their refrain: "I have sinned. I am not worthy, I am not worthy." The first pastor turns to the second and sneers, "Now look who thinks he's unworthy!"

Pharisees are well educated in the practices of faith, doing their best to bring religious observance into daily life. Indeed, Luke's Pharisee excels in spiritual practices. He tithes! He fasts! He prays! Who among us would not want a congregation full of tithers whose giving exceeds the typical 1-2 percent? In our contexts, where "fast" has more to do with fast food than with a fast *from* food, this level of spiritual commitment is impressive. At every seminary or divinity school where I've been, students and faculty complain that their prayer lives suffer under the pressures of the academic year. Yet the Pharisee manages to go all the way to the Temple to pray. In a culture where we feel overworked, overstressed and overtired, the spiritual life of the Pharisee can look pretty good.

Congregational culture exerts pressure to be like the Pharisee. In discussions about successful ministries, statistical measures are cited: weekly attendance is up, giving is up, new programs are in place, and we have added a worship service. These are fine things, and our pharisaic friend from the parable would fit right in, skewing the numbers even higher. Many of us would love to see quantifiable evidence that congregants take seriously the call to discipleship and prayer. To that end, seminaries across the country and across denominations are adding "spiritual formation" requirements, as if we could mandate deeper love for God and neighbor by putting it onto a pass/fail checklist. It is tempting to put our faith in the myths of the dominant culture: bigger is better; more is superior; numbers tell the whole story of personal value and depth of faith. Perhaps this is why some pastors and churchgoers are tempted to "upgrade" to bigger churches the way other people upgrade their cars.

In my office I display the diplomas of my graduate institutions, reminders of the sacrifices it took for me to complete those programs. If I am honest, I must admit that I am proud of the achievement they represent. My business cards include my professional title, because rank matters—at least within academic circles. I update my cv regularly, making sure not to omit any publications that might increase my stature among academic colleagues. It is easy to hide under the cloak of respectability. But the myth-busting nature of Jesus' parable exposes the extent to which I am a product of my culture: how much like the Pharisee I really am. I have the statistics to prove it.

Two thousand years of interpretation and the current cultural pressures to measure up lead us—perhaps for the wrong reasons—to assume that we are like the tax collector, even as we continue in our pharisaic tendencies. So we add it to our

checklists and proudly mark items off: pray, fast, tithe, humbly trust God.

The gospel of Jesus Christ offers a different way of assessing value, an undoing of these worldly statistical claims to superiority. Neither church growth, nor spirituality, nor outreach, nor diplomas, nor titles, nor even the ability to offer eloquent prayers is the yardstick against which God measures our value as children of God’s realm. It is tax collectors who are invited to the head of the class, not Pharisees—sinners who dine closest to the Savior, not the self-righteous. But the same gift is given to each: eyes to see the truth about who we really are and power to become most fully the persons that Christ calls us to be.