

Sunday, October 24, 2010: Luke 18:9-14

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

The priests are up well before dawn. They rub the sleep from their eyes as they begin stoking the great fire at the altar. The musicians arrive in clumps, tune their strings and complain about the early hour. The ram's horn player warms his instrument in his hands and under his cloak, then gently blows air through it. A priest's assistant pulls a lamb from its pen, binds its legs and brings it to the altar. As dawn breaks the ceremony begins. The musicians and singers take up the familiar tunes of the psalms. The priests march in procession. At the altar one priest raises a knife to the lamb's throat, drains its blood into a basin and throws the blood on the fire at the altar. The sacrifice of atonement is made. The sins of the people are covered. Now the priests light incense, and plumes of smoke indicate that it is the time for the prayers of the people to ride along on those scented clouds to God.

The ritual is repeated again at three in the afternoon. Again the priests offer the sacrifice of atonement in elaborate ritual. Again the people go up to the temple to pray. They gather to pray their individual prayers out loud. This is the setting for Jesus' parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

Who knows what the tax collector was up to all night? He looked as if he hadn't slept. Whatever he'd been up to, he felt sorry about it in the morning light. He stood in a corner at the back of the congregation, far removed from others, and beat his chest in a display of emotion reserved for women at funerals. The Pharisee, on the other hand, was refreshed and eager after a night's sleep that's reserved for those with a clear conscience. He went to the very front of the room. He too stood apart, but his motive for it was different—he feared brushing his clothing against the clothing of one who did not keep the law. Such contact would render him unclean. He adopted the prayer position of the day, then raised his hands with palms up and open. He lifted up his eyes to God and prayed loud enough to make his prayer a lecture for all within earshot. "Thank you, God," he prayed. "Thank you that I am not like other people, especially those who don't care about you or about making this a holy nation. Thank you that I am not a cheat or a rogue or an adulterer, like that tax collector cowering in the corner. What is he even doing here? I fast twice a week. I give 10 percent of my gross income, and 10 percent of the food I buy at market just in case the farmer who grew it and the vendor who sold it have not recognized your Lordship, O God, by tithing it to you. I have done what is right."

Jesus uses this parable to lure us into a trap. Hearing it we cannot help but be thankful we are not like that Pharisee. If we are thankful we are *not* like him, then we *are* just like him. It is a trap, but it is a good trap.

I am familiar with traps from watching Indiana Jones movies. The heroes walk along a path that seems safe until danger rears up in front of them, then they turn to run back the way they have come—only to find that the path is closed off. They are caught. Jesus leads his hearers along the path of this parable. Jesus uses his words to construct a mirror in which his hearers suddenly see themselves as the Pharisee. They turn to escape and discover that Jesus has blocked the way out. He knows that the direction in which they were headed was deadly.

In Luke, Jesus does not construct a rational argument meant to appeal to our reason. We have all sorts of rational arguments to deflect the accusation that we might be like the Pharisee. Jesus does not tell the parable to appeal to our hearts, thereby creating a sentimental feeling for the repentant tax collector. Instead Jesus gives us the terrifying experience of recognizing ourselves in the Pharisee. Turning from the deadly direction we were traveling with him, we are brought face-to-face with the teller of the story. Following Jesus' lead, we are brought to Jerusalem and his cross.

We flee our sins and seek refuge at the cross of Christ. We gather for worship because the Spirit of God calls us to turn to the cross. We come seeking God's grace. The priests and musicians have been up since dawn—nowadays that amounts to turning on light switches, practicing the sermon, limbering up fingers on the keyboard and tuning voices. The altar guild makes preparations for the ritual to take place at the altar. What takes place at the altar is not a sacrifice for sin. It does not have to be done every day at dawn and 3 p.m. or even weekly at 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. to cover the sins of the people.

Rather, Jesus sacrifices himself once for all. He's got us covered. By confession we die with him and rise with him to new life. He covers us with his righteousness and is present with us in his supper. He clears the way for our prayers to ascend to God. "Lord, we thank you for making atonement for us and setting us free to live as your confident and joyful people in this world. Amen."