

General principles: Luke 18:9-14

by [J. Mary Luti](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

I had a childhood friend whose mother yelled at her a lot. Her mother's ravings, however, were rarely attached to identifiable offenses. Asked why she was yelling, she'd snarl, "On general principles!" It was a free-form thing. Sometimes she'd yell about real crimes, but Tina was innocent of many of them. Her mother was unbowed. If Tina hadn't done that particular bad thing, she'd done plenty of others, so the yell would be applied to something Tina had gotten away with.

Once, Tina asked her mom to yell at her for everything, past, present and future, and thus be done with it--one good yell of five, maybe six days. Had her mother possessed a sense of irony, that could have been a wondrous thing.

Although Tina's mother was often unfair, my friend and I blame her less now. At 50, an injured attitude is not becoming. At this point in our lives, we have a better understanding of what we've done, of the sins we're capable of committing. This year at Tina's church, some members want to drop the confession from the weekly service. It's too depressing, too guilt-inducing, they say. But Tina and I don't agree with them. We're willing to say we're sinners--not evil, mind you, but habitually self-preoccupied and far less grateful than we should be as people who, although often and deeply hurt, have escaped untold catastrophes.

We're not guilt-ridden either, although sometimes we feel responsible for everything. Being sinners is just something true about us, not special. It's a free-form thing, and we have both taken daily to begging God's mercy, on general principles.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about two men. One is a Pharisee "standing by himself" in the temple. He's there to pray, but what he delivers is more a report than a prayer. He's kept a precise record of his religious temperature and informs God of every change in degree. God is a passive audience whose job is to applaud when the report is done. Overhearing, we learn nothing about who God is, what God does; but we come to know the man.

He believes himself singular: "I am not like the rest." He's appointed himself monitor of other people's lives, and when he says he's not in any way like them, he believes the illusion. His contempt for them is proportionate to his assumption that what he has accomplished, he has accomplished. Full of what he thinks is self-knowledge, he is instead merely self-absorbed; he doesn't understand that these two things are not the same.

The other man is a tax collector who wants no attention; he stands "far off." Spiritually, he claims no singularity: he's "a sinner." He lists no deeds, bad or good, for God to punish or approve--although given the profession he's in, he could easily rattle off dozens of crimes. He could claim that he's the worst sinner God ever put up with, not like other sinners whose misdeeds are small, hardly worth noting. But he doesn't mention other people's lives; he only asks mercy on his.

He is a man who knows himself, what he's done, what he's capable of doing. He is, to be sure, abject; but he doesn't puff himself up with self-loathing, as the Pharisee puffs himself up with self-esteem. All the same, the outward signs of this sinner's abjection have real weight; they're not hollow like the moral man's overblown speech. Every time the tax collector strikes his heart, he wakes it up a little more from some benumbed illusion. He knows God, too. His unembellished prayer for mercy is a plea for God to act like God.

We are so accustomed to Luke's ironic reversals that his tag line is almost lost on us. The serious, morally passionate Pharisee goes home on bad terms with God. But this fact remains as unknown to him as his real human condition. The degenerate tax collector goes home "justified." He may not be aware of God's verdict on him either, but his innocence is the opposite of the Pharisee's. It's the holy indifference that transparent people know, the mysterious freedom of the sinner with no secrets from God.

There's an old saying--a brazen one, surely--that people in heaven celebrate their earthly sins throughout eternity. If that's true, it's because they know where they'd be without them. (Julien Green's incisive lines come to mind: "I want to get rid of the sin from my life," says the Christian. "And I will help you," says Pride, "That way, we'll both have a peaceful time of it.") In the Easter Proclamation at the Great Vigil, Christians praise God not for their good deeds, but for the "happy sin" of Adam--our sin--that earned them so great a savior. In the New Testament, even Jesus lines up with sinners for a baptism of repentance, and God declares divine delight in him.

I like to think that the tax collector felt that odd joy in his thumped-upon heart. If we had more imagination in our communities of faith, more irony and more honesty, maybe we would feel the joy too. Then we could be redeemed from our grim failures of Christian instruction in sin and humility--from an excess or lack of humility that makes us illusion-prone disciples.