Rather than or alongside?

By Evan D. Garner
October 17, 2016

On Sunday, we will hear of the parabolic encounter of the tax collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14). When they leave to go home, does the tax collector depart justified *rather than* the Pharisee, as most (perhaps all) major English translations put it, or is he justified *alongside* his self-righteous colleague? And does that have the power to upend everything we thought we knew about this familiar parable?

Last week, I went to the Episcopal seminary in Sewanee, Tennessee, for an opportunity to interview some potential contextual education partners, students who might spend two semesters in our parish as part of their formation. One of the treats for mentors like me is the opportunity to sit in on a class, and I attended one of Jim Brosend's Parables and Preaching seminars. One of the topics in that session was this particular parable, and Brosend suggested to us that the Greek construction typically rendered as "rather than" is "παρ' ἐκεῖνον," which is "*para*" + a noun in the accusative case. In Greek, Brosend argued, *para* + the accusative can mean "rather than" but far more often means "alongside." To make this point, he turned to the concept of "parable" as "*para*" + "*bole*" or literally "to throw alongside." I raised my hand and tried to make the point that this "casting alongside" in parables is to make a comparison—a distinction—but he turned my statement back on itself and noted that such a comparison can (often is) to draw similarities and not always differences. I was stumped.

What happens when we hear Jesus say, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified alongside the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted?" From the pulpit, I avoid mentioning the Greek text at all costs, and I am not about to tell the congregation that *para* + the accusative usually means "alongside." But I do think it's worth considering what a Pharisee represented in Jesus' day. Even though I'm not willing to discard *rather than* altogether, I do think that, if we try to consider righteousness from a first-century Palestinian Jewish perspective, the *alongside* begins to make more sense.

Pharisees were righteous. Everyone knew that. As the man said of himself, "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." What's wrong with that? Nothing. As far as we can tell, this man did everything that was expected of him and more. He embraced his faith fully. His life was genuinely shaped by what he believed. When it came to status before God—the question of righteousness—this man had done everything he was supposed to do. But, of course, something was missing.

Although we are predisposed to think of Pharisees as the bad guys, even Jesus' first-century hearers would have known that Jesus was setting him up for a fall: "I thank God that I am not like ... this tax collector." The Pharisee wasn't wrong in how he lived his life, but his besetting sin was his inability to behold the potential righteousness of a notorious sinner. That is, the Pharisee shortchanged God's forgiveness and mercy. The sinful corollary of a super-holy life is a falsely elevated doctrine of humanity. If we fall into the trap of thinking we're all that, it's only natural to forget that God's love has no limits. After all, why would a notorious sinner have just as much a claim on God's kingdom as we Pharisees?

Hold these two images of righteousness alongside each other. One is a Pharisee who did everything he was supposed to do in order to gain right standing in God's eyes. The other is a tax collector, whose life was a complete repudiation of everything God would ask him to do. Could both be justified? If we believe that it is possible for the tax collector to be made right with God, we must believe that such righteousness comes not from his own works but from God's mercy. That's unmistakable. But what does that mean for the Pharisee? Perhaps he, too, has right standing before God, but, as the parable indicates, he's standing off by himself. His is a lonely place. He is the older brother from the parable of the two lost sons. He might be righteous, but a righteousness that doesn't depend on God's mercy—a righteousness that sells God's forgiveness short—is a lonely, short-sighted, sad existence. Perhaps that's not righteousness at all.

Originally posted at A Long Way from Home