

When we advertise our righteousness, it becomes self-righteousness

What we can learn from the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 12, 2020](#) issue



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Three weeks before Lent begins each year, the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14). For Orthodox Christians, this parable, in which a Pharisee confidently reports on his virtues and a tax collector humbly asks God for mercy, tees off a pre-Lenten season focused on humility and repentance.

The Pharisee in the story doesn't pray to God in supplicating fashion so much as he announces his own righteousness: "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." The Pharisee claims moral high ground while demonstrating his disgust with others—a pairing that directly targets Jesus' audience. According to Luke, Jesus told the parable to some people "who trusted in

themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

The Pharisee’s stance is related to a phenomenon in our own day called “virtue signaling.” It’s a mostly pejorative term applied to those eager to advertise their own righteousness. In a bid for praise, often disguised beneath expressions of indignation and moral outrage, signalers indicate just how kind and decent they are. Social media fosters this particular form of vanity because broadcasting personal virtue is right at home on such platforms. But more generally, smug posturing doesn’t need Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to thrive. We can notice the human tendency to burnish personal reputation just by reading a 2,000-year-old parable, or observing political candidates boasting to their base, or reflecting on our own daily desire to be viewed favorably by others.

It’s one thing to want to be good, to lead a virtuous life, to stand behind moral values of consequence. It’s altogether another to want other people to know just how good we are. Herein lies the danger of virtue signaling: it’s mostly talk. Signalers can trumpet their outrage or anger, or indicate support for fashionable causes, all without obligating themselves to any substantive action that might bring more hope and healing to the world. And this signaling relies on criticizing others, implicitly or explicitly, in order to boost one’s own image by comparison.

Publicly accusing someone of virtue signaling carries its own problems. Accusers who are unwilling to identify with legitimate concerns or interests that matter to the signaler may be doing nothing more than leveling cheap criticism and displaying their own self-righteousness. What’s more, distinguishing genuine outrage from feigned righteousness is not always as easy as it seems. All kinds of motives and perspectives shape behavior. Determining whether the moral reaction of another person to a given situation is authentic is precarious work at best, especially if we don’t know the full depth of that person’s character and convictions cultivated over time.

Virtue signaling is about our urge to show virtue or expertise by drawing comparisons between others and ourselves. To return to Jesus’ parable, the Pharisee’s problem isn’t his righteousness; it’s his self-righteousness, his trust in his own goodness. While we may be quick to thank God that we are not like the Pharisee, which would be its own exercise in vanity and comparison, what we need is the posture of the tax collector: more distance from chatter about virtue, greater reluctance to self-promote, and an acknowledgment that we’re nothing apart from

God's mercy.

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