

# On the Level

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*Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)*  
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Text: Luke 18:9-14

Today's parable reads like a Goofus and Gallant cartoon. Goofus and Gallant are two characters, both boys, who have appeared in *Highlights for Children* magazine since 1946. They're meant to teach children about kindness and manners, and the illustrations in which they appear always show Goofus doing the wrong thing, and Gallant doing the right thing. For example, there's a panel from 1980 that shows Goofus looking stern and holding up his finger while talking to another boy, who looks quite intimidated, while the caption says, "Goofus bosses his friends." Right next to this there's an illustration where Gallant is sitting down against a log, facing two other children, a boy and a girl, with his arms held wide. The caption: "Gallant asks, 'What do you want to do next?'"

It's a great teaching tool, because it allows children to stand outside the situation and imagine what others feel in response to Goofus and Gallant's actions. Goofus embodies the unrestrained id of children. He follows every impulse, indulges every desire, cuts every corner, and insists on getting his own way. In contrast, Gallant is the voice of wisdom and conscience, constantly setting aside his own needs in consideration for others. Some adults have cheekily observed that Gallant seems like a lot more fun. But in recent years, the magazine has added a tag line to the feature that says, "There's some Goofus and Gallant in us all. When the Gallant shines through, we show our best self." I suspect that's the best way to see this type of story. We're not all Goofus, we're not all Gallant, and we never will be purely one or the other. But these characters are types that help us to identify and negotiate with the competing feelings and impulses that arise in all of us.

So, as you might have guessed, the Pharisee in the parable is Goofus. His words are a very strange picture of prayer. He doesn't ask anything of God, I guess because he doesn't need anything. He is complete, whole, finished, perfected, with nothing to regret, no lessons left to learn, no growth in his life possible. He does give thanks. He thanks God for his own righteousness, which can be seen in his faithful practices of tithing and fasting. But he also gives thanks at the expense of other people, people formed in God's image and dear to God's own heart. I wonder how God would have heard that? "Thank you, God, for not screwing up with me like you screwed up with all those other people." When he gives thanks, one hand takes away what the other gives, so his thanks doesn't honor God at all. Augustine of Hippo, preaching on this text some 1600 years ago, got it right when he said that the Pharisee didn't come to the Temple to praise God. He came to praise himself.<sup>1</sup>

The tax collector is Gallant. And here's where the parable takes a weird turn, as far as Jesus' first-century hearers would have been concerned. Because the tax collector is an odd choice for this role. Outside of this episode in the Temple, the tax collector is

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *St. Augustin: Sermon on the Mount; Harmony of the Gospels; Homilies on the Gospels*. New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886. Sermon LXV.

anything *but* Gallant. He's a collaborator, someone who helps the Roman occupiers exploit and impoverish his people. What's more, his salary comes out of what he collects. He has every incentive to cheat his neighbors, and more than likely this is exactly what he does. He's an utterly despicable person.

And yet he comes to the Temple with his heart in his hand. He knows his life has fallen far short of what God wants for him. He knows he's missed the mark. He doesn't even dare to approach the front of the sanctuary—he stands far off. He doesn't dare lift his eyes up to heaven. He beats his chest in sorrow. He comes to God desperate, like a parched traveler to a desert oasis. He makes no effort to put on a good face. He comes to God exposed and vulnerable. He says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

And Jesus tells us that it is this man's prayer that is heard and answered. "I tell you," says Jesus, "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." The downcast sinner, not the self-proclaimed perfect Pharisee, was the one who received God's blessing.

There are a couple of lessons in here for us. The first is the Goofus and Gallant lesson, which is simply this: There's some proud Pharisee and some humble tax collector in us all. When the humble tax collector shines through, we show God the self God most wants to see and bless. It's only when we have no other leg to stand on, when we give up trying to justify ourselves, when before God and within ourselves we claim ownership of our flaws and failures—it's only then that God lifts us up.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." The straightforward lesson of this parable is that God wants to commune with us in our vulnerability, in our anxiety, in our doubt, in our brokenness. When you come before God in prayer, lead with your weakness, your need. Lead with the places in your life that are empty, if you want to drink from God's fullness.

But there's another lesson here too, and the clue is in the verse that introduces the parable, telling us that Jesus told it for the sake of "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." And Jesus teaches this lesson, not in the development of the straightforward story, but in his choice of characters, in the type of people Jesus chose to cast as Goofus and Gallant. I think it's easy to overlook how scandalous this parable would have been to Jesus' first hearers. The Pharisee was a respected model of faithfulness. The tax collector was leading a life that actively harmed God's people.

And yet in that moment God's grace, God's favor, God's blessing is no respecter of persons, no respecter of social standing. There's a radical leveling of the spiritual playing field. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector stand before God with the same need for forgiveness and renewal. In fact, the tax collector, because of his position in life, is the one who recognizes more acutely that he stands in a posture of need. When we look on others with contempt, it ought to serve as a sign that, when it comes to our spiritual life, we're doing it wrong.

Whom do we look upon with contempt? With whom do we compare ourselves, so that we come out looking better? If I call to mind all the frustrating encounters I've had in a given week, if I remember every driver who cut me off, everyone who said something thoughtless, there seem to be a lot of times I say in my head, if not aloud, "What a jerk!" The former President of Fuller Theological Seminary Richard Mouw once spoke about an encounter in a parking lot, where he pulled into a space, and got out of his car only to realize that there had been another driver waiting for the space. This woman shouted and honked at him before driving off in frustration. Dr. Mouw followed her (not something I'd recommend!), and when she got out of her car, he apologized, and she broke down in tears, saying, "You have no idea what kind of day

I've had."<sup>2</sup> When I heard about this encounter and Dr. Mouw's response, I felt very convicted. I wonder whether in our hurried lives we often miss the brokenness and pain around us that lead people to act as they do. I wonder how often we, without knowing it, are guilty of regarding others with contempt. And if that's true, I wonder if we need to hear, again and again, the message of this parable, which offers us a cure for our indifference, our lack of empathy, and our self-righteousness—to turn back again and again to God as the one who fills our emptiness and stoops to embrace us exactly at our neediest moments, to envision ourselves as standing, not above our neighbor, but on the same level in our need of God's grace.

So may you be slow to judge those around you and quick to turn to God in prayer. May you offer God not your accomplishments, not your put-togetherness, but your weakness and vulnerability. And may the God of endless mercy fill your cup to overflowing. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Mouw, Interview with Krista Tippett on *On Being*, 10/14/2010.  
<https://onbeing.org/programs/richard-mouw-restoring-political-civility-an-evangelical-view/>.  
Accessed 10/27/2019.