

In recent weeks we’ve seen a lot of political campaign ads on TV with billions of dollars being spent on these ads. A recent CNN report said that these ads are really meant to target just a small percentage of the population that is not aligned with either major party, because the belief is that Republicans are going to vote Republican, and Democrats are going to vote Democratic anyway. But in this effort to reach a relatively small target audience, vast resources are being expended to discredit candidates on both sides of the aisle—to the point where voters are seeing shadows of doubt being cast over all the candidates, including the ones they prefer. And so for each candidate in the running now, someone may be asking: Can I trust him? Can I trust her?

Trust is a big thing in our lives. Ideally, we learn to trust at a very early age. We trust that our parents will love and care for us and be there for us. We learn to make friends with our peers, and along the way build trust with them. We grow to trust our teachers and the professionals in our community. And we put our faith in those who run for office, both locally and nationally, who have expressed their desire to do what is right and good. And while we know that we don’t live in a perfect world, there is that part of us that seeks to trust others, perhaps because God wired us that way when he brought us into the world.

But trust is not only something that connects us to those around us, it moves in other directions as well—for there is the trust that we have in ourselves, and the trust with which we reach out to God.

In our Scripture from Luke’s Gospel today we hear a brief story about two men who went to the Temple to pray—one a Pharisee and the other a publican. And as Jesus often did, he turns things upside down in the telling of this story. The Pharisees, who were lay persons, made it a point to carefully study the Jewish law, and they not only studied it, but observed it very closely. They practiced one of the things that we’ve been learning in our *Companions in Christ* classes, which is to find God’s presence in all of the daily routines of life. And as a movement within the Jewish faith, the Pharisees also engaged in social justice by defending the rights of migrant farm workers. So in the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were generally held in high esteem. Tax collectors, however, were not just civil servants, they actually bid for the right to collect taxes from their fellow Jews for the Roman government, which resulted in their being despised by other Jews who saw them as traitors. They were also thought to be unclean because they had frequent contact with Gentiles at times when their religious laws forbid them to do that.

While Jesus’ listeners might initially have anticipated this to be a story about a good person and a not-so-good- person, Jesus reverses what they might have expected to hear, in order to invite them *and us* to think about our lives. The Pharisee, in his prayer, offers words of thanksgiving, that God has preserved him from participating in the sinful behaviors that others have expressed in their lives, and that he himself was going above and beyond what was required in regard to tithing and fasting. *Now we need to say* that for the Pharisee to thank God for the path he was on and for the faithfulness that he was expressing didn’t make this a prideful or hypocritical prayer in and of itself. But where the Pharisee begins to fall down is when we a sense that there’s something else going on as well—for while the Pharisee would be seen as a righteous person by the standards of that day, he is also moving into self-righteousness. He’s saying: **“Because I’m living in**

the way I am, I'm really a notch above these other people who aren't. And I'm definitely several notches above this tax collector who's in the Temple today."

The tax collector, however--described as standing far off--**"would not even look up to heaven, but beating his chest, said: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"** He recognized that not everything was right in his life. And in particular, something may not have been right in how he was doing his job as a tax collector. Had he just been involved in some kind of shady deal that he now regretted, or was it that he had been looking over the years of being a tax collector, and was grieving the loss of his integrity, yet not finding any other way to support his family? We don't know. But why was it the case that he went back to his home justified, that is, *set right with God*, rather than the Pharisee? What made the difference?

One way to answer that question is to look at the life of the Apostle Paul, whose words we read in our first lesson for today. This Scripture from II Timothy shows us that in some ways Paul resembles both the Pharisee and the tax collector. Like the Pharisee, Paul is stating his accomplishments. He has fully engaged the life set before him--fighting the good fight, finishing the race, keeping the faith. He awaits a reward--a crown of righteousness. Paul is openly declaring that his ministry for the Lord Jesus Christ, soon to be completed, was carried out with a high degree of commitment. But like the tax collector, Paul names God as the ultimate source of his life. Paul says: **"(It was) the Lord (who) stood by me and gave me strength."** And in his 1st letter to Timothy, Paul writes: **"This is a true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. But God was merciful to me in order that Christ Jesus might show his full patience in dealing with me, the worst of sinners, as an example for all those who would later believe in him and receive eternal life."**

As far as Paul was concerned, all the glory belongs to God. For it was only through God's grace, that Paul found his life transformed from that of being a persecutor of the early church and an enemy of our Lord Jesus, to that of becoming a world-wide missionary, taking the Good News of Jesus Christ into the Gentile world of which you and I are a part today. Paul put his trust in the Lord for everything--for the empowerment to live his life and do his work, and for the compassion to forgive his sins.

And so the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector was this: the Pharisee trusted in himself; he seemed to have no need for the power of God in his life, or for the gift of God's forgiveness. The tax collector, on the other hand, recognized his need for both. So he threw himself on the mercy of God, trusting that the Lord would supply what he needed: power to live for God and forgiveness when he fell short.

May we also trust in the power and mercy of our Lord as we live our lives for him every day. Amen.