

I have often wondered if it is possible to have an honest Thanksgiving in an industrialized civilization. I get how you could have such a day of celebration in a community totally reliant on the harvest. The agrarian feels himself dependent upon nature's benevolence, and at the mercy of nature's caprice. When the harvest is finally safe in the barns there arises a sigh of relief, and with it a spirit of gratitude that almost expresses itself religiously seeing how the bounty is actually created by the mysterious forces of nature, which man may guide but never quite control. Not so with an industrialized civilization in which so much wealth is stockpiled by the ingenuity of the machine, the creativity of technology, the diligence of man. Thanksgiving then becomes increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers, which of course means us. A national Thanksgiving, particularly if it is meant to express gratitude for material bounty, becomes an increasingly pharisaical rite—We thank Thee Lord that we are not like other men—which brings me to my point, and the parable of Jesus this morning. For if the events in the parable happened today, I think the Pharisee would be able to find someone to plead his case. The story paints a sinister picture of the Pharisee and a saintly picture of the Tax collector. But is this a fair picture? Not really. The Pharisee was strong in his convictions, shouldn't we all be? The Pharisee was diligent in his prayer life, isn't that admirable? The Pharisee was looked upon by others as being devout and honest and decent, wouldn't we call that a reputation worth having? And what of his prayer? "God, I thank you that I am not like other men". Are we all not inclined to look upon the fates of others and give thanks to God for the blessings that we have? In fact, a similar quote goes like this: "If you try my heart, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me. As for what others do, by the word of Your lips, I have avoided their ways, my steps hold fast to Your paths, my feet have not slipped". That's Psalm 17. So why do we call the Pharisee proud, but not make the same accusation against the Psalmist?

The behavior of the tax collector, on the other hand, poses a serious moral question: Can one act of penance make up for a lifetime of misdeeds? The tax collector made his fortunes by extortion and dishonesty. He used the Roman tax system against his own people. He used Roman soldiers to confiscate property and goods when people were unable to pay their taxes. He used Roman laws to rob widows and families of life's necessities. Prior to the events of the parable, who knows how long it had been since he had

darkened the doors of a church. Are we just supposed to accept that because this man grew a conscience all of a sudden that his evils were magically undone; that saying he was sorry was enough to make up for a lifetime of abuse? And besides that, who's to say if he really changed his ways when he left the church? I grant that he felt bad in the moment, but did he really alter his life and choose a nobler path?

What kind of a religion is this where God rewards crooks and chastises honest folks. What is the value of virtue when God favors those who live contrary to decency. How is this fair? Well, whoever said God was fair? And if you think He should be, I'd say, not smart. We don't really want a fair God. We want a merciful one. For all his goodness, the Pharisee was guilty of one sin, but it was a biggie. The sin of pride. You and I know pride. We recognize it in others. The conceited who never stop bragging about personal accomplishments, the arrogant who lord it over you, the vain who worships the body, the scholar who worships the mind. We recognize pride in others because we first recognize it in ourselves. When I become irritated at someone who corrects me, when I get upset with someone for dominating the conversation, when I am offended because someone didn't fully acknowledge my contribution or my hard work, it is not my pride that has been wounded? Pride is different from self-esteem. Pride is the esteem of self at the expense of others. Pride is an overinflated ego, which towers above others, even God Himself, until I begin to look down on all of them. It is a spiritual cancer destroying the possibility for true friendship or love or community. For all his praying, what is missing in the Pharisee's prayer? He never once asked God for anything. He told God, but never asked God. What appears at first glance to be genuine faith is really nothing more than narcissism. The tragedy of sin is that it attacks us not by striking at our weakness, but precisely at our strengths. This is where we are most vulnerable. The praise due the Creator was given to the creature. The tax collector, however, didn't tell God anything, He asked. He confesses, "God be merciful to me a sinner." This alone is a cause for Thanksgiving. This alone sets heaven rejoicing. One sinner who repents. For what the tax collector actually prayed for that day was the exact opposite of his worship companion. It was not, "thank you Lord for not making me like all these others" but rather, "Lord, I beg Thee, make me other than I am". "Recreate me in the likeness of Yourself". Two people walk into the temple

to pray. Each received what he asked for. The first told God how good he was. He asked for nothing and received it. The second, deeply aware of his sin prayed for mercy. And his prayer was answered. Amen.