

THE GIFT OF INADEQUACY

Mark Twain once wrote about a sea captain named Stormfield. Stormfield receives a mighty surprise the day he marches into heaven. He is met by Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. "I beg pardon," Captain Stormfield says to St. Peter, "You mustn't mind my reminding you and seeming to meddle, but hain't you forgot something?" St. Peter ponders for a moment and then shakes his head. "Forgot something? No, not that I know of." Captain Stormfield is stunned. "Think," he says. St Peter thinks for a moment and then replies, "No, I can't seem to have forgotten anything."

During his life Captain Stormfield had sat through more than a thousand church services, many which were devoted to the advantages of heaven over earth. He is now dumbfounded. A truly good man arrives at the Pearly Gates and the gatekeeper doesn't seem to know what in the world heaven is all about. "Look at me," Captain Stormfield cries, "You don't notice anything? If I branched out among the elect looking like this, wouldn't I attract considerable attention? Wouldn't I be a little conspicuous?" Peter asks. "I don't see anything the matter. What do you lack?" "Lack! Why, I lack my harp, my wreath, my halo, my hymnbook, and my palm branch. I lack everything that a body naturally requires up here, my friend." After pondering this for a while, peter finally says, "I'm sure sorry about this, but I never heard of these things before." Captain Stormfield looks at St. Peter in astonishment and says, "Now, I hope you don't take it as an offense, for I don't mean any, but really, for a man that has been in the kingdom as long as I reckon you have, you do seem to know powerful little about its customs"

May I say to you, friends, there are a lot of folks who have been in the kingdom a long time who know powerful little about its customs. Two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee was praying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." Then he listed the sins of other people. The Pharisee reminded God of all the righteous things he did on a regular basis, "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." And so on.

Far from the altar where the Pharisee was praying stood a lowly tax collector who was beating his breast. His prayer was much simpler, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" You know the rest of the story. According to Jesus it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who was made right before God. In examining this parable we discover, first of all, that WHEN WE BOAST OF OUR OWN ACCOMPLISHMENTS WE FORGET ABOUT GOD. That's true. In one of Lloyd John Ogilvie's books, he speaks of the "Gift of inadequacy." Think about those words for a few moments. The gift of inadequacy. It's easy to forget about God when everything's going our way. It's easy to fall into self-congratulations and pride.

You see, the Pharisee was a good, outstanding citizen. He was the type of man we would be proud to have as part of our community and our church. He was a pillar of society respected by everyone. He was dependable. He took his faith very seriously. He not only kept the Law, he exceeded what the law required. The Law required fasting once a week, but he fasted twice. He was sincere in his prayer. He enjoyed the work he did and was thanking God that he was able to perform his duties.

There was something missing in his life, however. Something was wrong and he just didn't see it. What was missing was the gift of inadequacy. God wanted a place in the Pharisee's heart; the Pharisee wanted to give God a place in the ritual. God wanted truth and sincerity within; the Pharisee wanted a set of rules he could follow. Something was missing in his life. He thought he could win God's favor by his own accomplishments. Instead, he was alienating himself from God and from others with his proud attitude. When we boast of our accomplishments, we forget God.

THE PHARISEE NEEDED TO DISCOVER THAT WE DRAW CLOSER TO GOD AND TO OTHERS WHEN WE ARE ABLE TO ADMIT OUR SHORTCOMINGS AND RELY ON GOD'S GRACE. Friends, I'm sorry to have to say this to you, but we are all sinners. The Apostle Paul reminds us: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." In First John we find this verse, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Understanding our inadequacy is a prelude to grace. Pastor Dennis Keen tells of a woman from a small town in Pennsylvania's depressed coal region who would cry uncontrollably every time she took communion. He asked other parishioners about this woman, and they said she had cried at communion for as long as they could remember. After one service pastor Keen asked her, "Why do you cry while kneeling at the altar every time you receive Holy Communion?" Her response surprised her pastor. She said, "Every time I receive the bread and cup I can't help but think that Christ died for me. I feel that the only fitting response is crying. By crying I am remembering what Christ did for me. I feel so sorry, so sad, so unworthy, to receive the communion."

The tax collector felt unworthy. He was ashamed of himself and the life he lived. He stood as far from the altar as he possibly could, he felt so unworthy. He couldn't even assume the proper prayer stance. He would not even look up to heaven. But when he prayed God heard his prayer. The tax collector realized when he went to the temple that his was not an honest profession. He beat his breast in great despair knowing that he had no right to call on God's mercy. When he prayed he called attention to his sins and not his accomplishments. When he prayed he opened himself up to God, trusting in God and not himself. Jesus said, "This man went down to his home justified rather than the other." Worthy? Yes! Thanks to the grace of God. And so it is with each of us. We kid ourselves if we think otherwise. The gift of inadequacy. The tax collector was made right before God because he was aware of his need before God.

One final thought. WE HELP OTHERS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST WHEN WE ARE WILLING TO CONFESS OUR INADEQUACY. There are some people who are intimidated by church people. They see us a collection of super saints. They are not drawn toward us. Rather, they prefer to avoid us because they feel so unworthy. We put on our pious expressions and people think we have it all together. Thus, like the Pharisee, we become unapproachable. And that's sad

The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. None of us should be intimidated by the saintly among us. Like Captain Stormfield in Mark Twain's story none of us has a harp, a halo, or a set of wings. If we could look into every heart, we would see there the gift of inadequacy. That is why we come to worship each Sunday. Not to trumpet our accomplishments, but to confess our needs. We are saved by grace and grace alone. A tax collector showed up at the temple. His prayer was simple and to the point: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" That's a good prayer for each of us to pray each and every day. AMEN.