

**Homily for October 24, 2004  
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18**

**Psalm 34:2-3, 17-19, 23**

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**

**Luke 18:9-1**

## *It's by the grace of God that we find God amid our virtues and our vices.*

We probably all have long lists of things we would never do. I would never rob a bank, or attack a helpless person, or run off with the estate planner's wife. It is beneath my dignity to cheat on a test or purchase clothing I intend to wear only once and then return for refund. God, am I good!

But then, I have never been financially hopeless; I have never been under attack myself; and I have never had an estate to plan. I have never been desperate enough to feel the need to cheat or to finagle clothing. God, am I good? Or have I just been sheltered from some of the hardships that many others face? How might I act if I were in their difficult situations?

It is very easy for people who conform to acceptable patterns of behavior to sit in judgment and consider themselves better than those who do not. This is not to imply that they should disregard these standards. On the contrary, societies would not survive or thrive if they did not insist on standards for living. Rather, it is to suggest that there is a difference

between being righteous and being self-righteous. Truly righteous or virtuous people know that they, too, are capable of contemptible behavior. They know that it is only because of the goodness of God that they have been spared situations in which their weaknesses would have overpowered them. The truly righteous are fundamentally humble.

The Pharisee in today's Gospel, Luke chapter 18, very likely did live a life devoid of greed, dishonesty and adultery. He probably did fast and tithe. But he did not realize that it was the goodness of God that lifted him up so that he could act in this righteous manner. He believed instead that it was his own goodness that lifted him up above others. On the other hand, in order to gain a livelihood, the tax collector probably extorted money from taxpayers. He was a sinner, and he knew it. But he also knew that only God could lift him up. It was his humble demeanor that earned God's praise.

Below the surface of the story is another dynamic just as forceful. Generally, Pharisees were considered good and faithful people who strove to put into practice the teachings of the Torah, the Law. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were mostly Jews who worked for the Roman government and therefore shared in exploiting

their own people. This was considered a form of apostasy, a rejection of the faith. Reading the parable without Saint Luke's interpretive slant gives a rather startling picture of God. Good people get rejected, and bad people are justified! How could this be? The issue is really focused on God. God's ways are not necessarily our ways. We do not know as much as we think about how God judges people. We assume that God assesses things as we do, and we could be wrong.

Both Saint Luke's interpretation and the issue below the text teach a similar lesson. Self-righteousness in any form is unacceptable to God. God is not required to disclose to humans the details of the divine plan. God is the only judge of who is acceptable and who is not. In relationship to God, all humans are sinners, and the only position that is justifiable is to admit that one is totally dependent on God's mercy.

All this talk is captured for me in a story we use in our parish retreat about a man who dies and goes to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter. "That's worth three points!"

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point."

"One point? I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," Saint Peter says.

"Two points?" Exasperated, the man cries, "At this rate, the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God."

"Bingo, 100 points! Come on in!"

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