

Sermon: Who is Justified?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, October 26, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

During a recent summer concert by the band Coldplay, a kiss-cam zeroed in on a seemingly lovely couple, of a gentleman leisurely embracing his date from behind. In a normal kiss-cam reaction, the couple, upon seeing themselves on the jumbotron, would turn and give each other a light kiss, in view of the entire stadium audience in the midst of enthusiastic applause. However, on that particular night, things didn't quite turn out as planned. The woman quickly covered her face, and the middle-age man tried awkwardly to duck out of the camera view. Sensing the kiss-cam might've captured an embarrassing moment, lead singer Chris Martin quipped, "Oh, look at these two...either they are having an affair or they are very shy...I am not quite sure what to do".

Well, social media sleuths certainly knew. They quickly went to work and identified the man as CEO Andy Byron of an obscure tech company Astronomer, and the woman as Kristin Cabot, the executive in charge of human resources at the same company. Just to be clear, they were indeed having an affair. Byron quickly resigned from his position out of embarrassment, and Cabot followed suit not long after. This 10-second episode on a kiss cam went viral and resulted in endless memes, parody videos and screenshots of the pair's shocked faces. The mainstream media weren't any better—it was discussed, dissected and regurgitated for two weeks following, on major networks. Perhaps they got nothing else more important to report, on slow summer days.

While I found this incident mildly amusing, I do wonder how many of us who participated in this mockery are truly morally blameless, not just those pundits on screen but all who watched, clicked, posted and judged. I wonder how easy it is for us to fall into the trap of moral superiority, to thumb our noses and wagged our fingers, saying, "Thank God, I am not like that cheating couple, getting caught on a kiss-cam, especially when they were alerted ahead of time." I wonder, how many of us truly understand that a divine kiss-cam is on each one of us, at all time, with a telescopic lens and infinite recording capability, judging us by a standard of holiness and righteousness that is all but impossible for satisfy. After all, Jesus taught that, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* (Matthew 5:27-28)

On the subject of moral superiority, Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. Here is the setup of this parable: *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”*

The temple in Jerusalem was the locus of Israel’s religious activities, for sacrificial rites and observance of various festivals. It is also, according to Isaiah 56, “a house of prayer for all peoples”, though in reality not all people were all that welcomed in it. Unlike the Sadducees who embraced the temple wholeheartedly, the Pharisees were mostly a lay movement, who focused mostly on studying and observing the Torah, in synagogues and at homes. So finding a Pharisee in the temple praying, is somewhat unusual—not implausible, just unusual. But finding a tax collector in a temple praying, that’s impossible, both socially and professionally.

You see, tax collectors were like independent contractors, both Jews and Gentiles, contracted by the Roman authority. They pay the Romans a set fee, for the right to collect taxes in a set territory, and the access to call upon Roman soldiers should there be a need. How they went about collecting those taxes were up to them. Often a network was setup, much like a pyramid scheme, with the lower level collectors funnelling money up the chain, to the chief collector. Often, they collected much more than what was officially prescribed, for the more they collected, the more they lined their own pockets. The penitent chief tax collector Zacchaeus (the subject of next Sunday’s Gospel lesson in Luke 19) alluded to this practice when he said, “if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

So one can understand that in the time of Jesus, tax collectors were universally hated, shunned when possible, and certainly not welcomed in the temple. The temple authority have their own taxation scheme, commonly known as tithing as prescribed in the Law of Moses. So in a real sense tax collectors and temple authority were in direct competition, competing for the precious dollar base of common taxpayers. Like oil and water, they simply don’t mix.

So here we have Jesus, who is himself a rebel in his own right, sets up this seemingly impossible scenario, like a bad joke, of both a Pharisee and a tax collector going up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, *‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’* Guess who comes out better in the eyes of God? Well, according to Jesus, “this man (meaning the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other (meaning the Pharisee).”

Now, before jumping in to beat up on this Pharisee as pompous and self-righteous, I want to give some leeway to his prayer. For it echoes the prayer in Psalm 17:3-5, *“If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.”* Oh how I wish all of you would pray like that; oh how I wish all of my parishioners would fast twice a week, and give a tenth of your income to support the ministry of St. Giles. I wouldn’t mind that at all. The real problem with this Pharisee’s prayer is how he was virtue-signalling to God and others about how important he is, while dismissing and looking down on others as unworthy before God.

Now, before embracing the prayer of this tax collector, I just want to point out that we don’t really know if this tax collector would go on to change his life, for a prayer of repentance without a commitment to do things differently is just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Nevertheless, here is a prayer of someone who had messed up in a big way, who had hit rock bottom. Like David did in Psalm 51, who prayed, *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”* This is a prayer from someone who knows that for any change to be possible, one must first be right with God, one must throw oneself at God’s mercy.

In his Luke commentary from the Interpretation series, author and preacher Fred Craddock made a good point of reminding us not to simplify these two characters as villain and hero. For if we do, we may go home after worship, thinking, “God, I thank thee that I am not like the Pharisees.” We would unconsciously and inevitably fall into the trap of moral superiority. Instead, Craddock points out that this parable is about God’s vindication—reversing our expectation as to who is more righteous in the eyes of God.

Theologian Karl Barth, in his distinguished work Church Dogmatics, commented also on this parable, in a section titled “The Sloth and Misery of Men”. For Barth, the Pharisee saw his status before God as the result of his own actions. His prayer is about what he is doing. Whereas, the tax collector is ashamed of his actions. His prayer is about what he had done. According to Barth, both men were equally “shamed” before God, but the only difference between the two is that the Pharisee is ignorant of his standing with God.

I think the key to understand this passage is the word “justified.”, as in verse 14, “this man went down to his home justified rather than the other”. To be justified before God is to ask the question of how we reach a status of righteousness in God’s eyes. The Pharisee trusted in himself for his own righteousness, and the tax collector trusted in God to make him right. He did

nothing to earn or deserve God's mercy. The possibility of God's mercy be freely given to him, is a sign of God's love for humanity, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 5:8, "*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*"

This parable in Luke 18 inevitably brings us back to Jesus, for he would eventually be judged by the Jewish religious authority as blasphemous, by the Roman imperial authority as seditious, and by a ravingly mad crowd shouting "crucify!", "crucify!" Jesus would embrace all that, knowing it was the will of his Father in Heaven, through his death and resurrection, to accomplish the plan set forth from the beginning of time, the justification of all through faith.

Therefore, God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

I will leave you with a fruit for thought, of how Jesus might've been seen and judged by us, should he appears in our world today. I draw your attention to the bulletin cover, displaying a satirical poster first published by the artist and socialist Arthur Henry Young, in 1917, then popularized during the investigation of Communist Activities in the New York Area in 1953. It is seemingly resurfacing now in the midst of increasing crackdown by the U.S. government against the so-called ANTIFA. The poster reads:

Reward. For information leading to the apprehension of
— . Jesus Christ. Wanted - for sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy,
and conspiring to overthrow the established government.
Dressed poorly, said to be a carpenter by trade,
ill-nourished, has visionary idea, associates with
common working people the unemployed and bums.
Alien - believed to be a Jew. Alias : 'Prince of peace', 'Son of man -
Light of the world', &c &c. Professional agitator.
Red beard, marks on hands and feet the result of
injuries inflicted by an angry mob led by respectable
citizens and legal authorities.

Something for us to chew on.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**