

# Daily Reflections

*Journeying through Lent*



Center for Spiritual Development

## THE TAX COLLECTOR STOOD OFF AT A DISTANCE

By Sr. Christine Hilliard, CSJ

### Today's First Reading

*Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. “Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.’ But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’ I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

**LUKE 18:9-14**

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**Reflection**

This passage is part of the “travel narrative” in Luke's Gospel as Jesus and his disciples journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Continuing the theme on prayer, it is only found in this third Gospel. The purpose of the parable is not to discourage religious practice, but to call into question the reasons why people take on devotion practices. The Pharisee hopes to justify himself in the world's eyes as well as in God's eyes -- like Jesus' audience, as Luke notes: *those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else.*

On the other hand, the tax collector does nothing pious and it would be shocking if he did anything good for anyone! During the Roman occupation, tax collectors were traitors to their own people as the taxes they collected were for the government. They were likewise known for pocketing the tax money from their own people. Also, dealing with pagan Romans made them ritually impure, which separated them even more from their fellow Jews. Compared with the devoted Pharisee, a tax collector would never be considered honest or pious. However, in this parable, the tax collector knows his sinfulness as he pleads for mercy, thus acknowledging his need for God. The Pharisee sings his own praises, apparently not aware of his arrogant sinfulness.

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## For Pondering

- Which character have you noticed in yourself? A little of both? More of one than the other? How do you deal with them?
- How do you keep yourself humble? OR what do you do to keep negative judgements of others minimal?
- Pray the prayer of the tax collector a few times during the days of this week: "O God be merciful to me a sinner."
- What is mercy? Describe how you have experienced God's mercy in your life.

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## For Prayer

*Merciful God,  
let me experience your mercy.  
Save me from pessimism,  
from bitterness  
and from cynicism.  
Help me  
avoid  
every form of arrogance,  
every hint of greed.  
Keep me honest,  
knowing my true self.  
Amen.*

**ADAPTED FROM REBBE NACHMAN OF BRESLOV**

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