



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Conversations With God: Throwing the Tax Collector Under the Bus

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 9:9-12, Luke 18:9-14

Man is the measure of all things.—Protagoras, Ancient Greek Sophist
God is preeminently the measure of all things, and not any “man,” as some have said—Plato, *Laws*
For I desire mercy, not sacrifice—Hosea 6:6 (KJV)

First, a few words on *behalf* of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable: initially at least, he recognizes that there is a higher standard governing him, the universe, and everything in it—a standard higher than his own wishes and desires, higher than any human wishes and desires. And he wants his thoughts, words, and actions—his person, his life, his very being—he wants them all to live up to that higher standard.

That’s laudable, and it’s the first step towards a morally decent human life—and no small step, either. To see that it is no small step, look at what happens when we *don’t* take it.

Start here: “Man is the measure of all things: of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not”—so said the ancient sophist, Protagoras. While that may sound impressive at first, what it ends up meaning is that a human being—and each of us as human beings—is the highest standard in the universe: there is no other, higher, measure of things. And what that ends up meaning is that, whatever I say is good and right and true, *is* good and right and true—no arguments brooked or even possible because there is no higher standard to appeal to in argument. And what *that* ends up meaning is: “If I want it, and I can get it, it’s mine—or should be mine—by any means necessary.”

“If there is no God,” Dostoevsky wrote, “then everything is permitted.”

But that’s *not* the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable—at least not at first. Initially, he recognizes not only a higher standard but God as *the highest* standard—the true judge—of him and his actions. He wants to do what is right, what is pleasing to God; he wants to *be* pleasing to God. Hence, he fasts twice a week; he gives away a tenth of all his income; he follows the law scrupulously; hence, he goes up to the temple to pray. That’s laudable, and it’s the first step towards a morally decent human life—and no small step, at that.

The problem with the Pharisee—what leads him to slide backwards, to lose his step—is the way he thinks about God: he thinks that God desires sacrifice and not mercy. And he’s ready to sacrifice anything and anyone—for example, *that* tax collector over there—to appease God. Listen again to his prayer:

“God, I thank you that I am not like those *other* people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. *I* fast twice a week; *I* give a tenth of all my income.”

You can hear it can’t you? It’s not just that he’s trying to make himself look good by looking on others with contempt, it’s more that he’s trying to make himself look good *to God* by getting *God* to look on others with contempt. In other words, to win God’s favor, he’s ready to throw that tax collector over there—and all tax collectors everywhere—under the bus. He thinks that God desires sacrifice and not mercy, and he’s ready—more than ready—to sacrifice *them*.

But nowadays, thank God, we're not like that. I mean, if you were to tell this parable today, about ourselves, it would have to be very different:

Two Americans went up the hill to pray.

The first said, "God, I thank you that I'm not like *those* other people: those politically-correct, coastal-elite, MSNBC-watching, Rachel-Maddow-loving, *snowflakes* who want want nothing more than for Nancy Pelosi to be re-elected as speaker of the House."

While the second one prayed like this: "God, I thank you that I'm not like *those* other people: those unenlightened, red-state, Fox News-watching, Sean-Hannity-loving *deplorables* who want nothing more than for Donald Trump to be re-elected President of the United States."

Which one of these two Americans came down the hill right with God? Neither. And why? Because each of them is ready to throw the other one—and all *those* other people like him—under the bus. Indeed each of them is ready to throw truth, decency, and humanity, not to mention everything that is good and great about America under the bus to win . . . And, to win what? God's favor? No, no, hardly that. More like the next day's news cycle. For sure, the next election. And beyond all doubt, a majority on the United States Supreme Court.

And so, in our shared political life, we end up right back where we were with "man is the measure of all things": "If I want it, and I can get it, it's mine—or should be mine—by any means necessary. Everything is permitted."

If you think I exaggerate, consider this: Dr. Christine Blasey Ford—the woman who has brought allegations against Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh—Dr. Ford and her family have now gone into hiding because of death threats against them. Now, I'm not saying anything about the truth or falsity, plausibility or implausibility, relevance or irrelevance, of *her* allegations; nor am I saying anything about *his* fitness or unfitness for the Supreme Court. What I'm saying is this:

If there is one institution in our country that represents the rule of law, and not the rule of mob violence; the rule of law and not the rule that might makes right; the rule of law and not the rule that if you can get away with it, then do it; if there is one institution in our country that represents the rule of law as a higher standard of truth and justice, it is the United States Supreme Court.

And yet to watch the *posturing* of our politicians and pundits, you would think the only thing that matters is winning. And this is true not only of this most recent Supreme Court nomination, but of almost all of them over the past thirty years, and true not only of political fights over Court nominations, but more and more of our politics in general.

And here's the sad irony: in the long run, nobody wins; we all lose. We all lose because the net effect is to undermine our shared trust in our institutions, our leaders, and most especially in ourselves and one another. In other words, the net effect is cynicism, alienation, and disgust. In this most recent round, the real losers include the Supreme Court and the Justice Department ("it's all just politics"), the rule of law and our judicial system in general ("it's all just politics"), the office of the presidency and the United States Senate, our political parties and our political system in general ("it's all just politics"), *and* our constitutional republic and our shared public life ("it's all just politics").

Now, I'm not trying to be an alarmist here. I recognize this is hardly the first time that Americans have felt disappointment in, distrust of, and even disdain for, their elected representatives, particularly, the United States Congress. And I recognize that our body politic, like the human body, can combat and survive any

number of pathogens in its various systems, and still function, still be relatively healthy. But all the same, there does come a point when the pathogens begin to take their toll and the body's overall health and well-being is adversely affected. And you have to wonder whether we, as a nation, have reached that point.

So: why did this happen? Why did we get ourselves caught in this destructive downward spiral? Because like the Pharisee standing on the hill, pointing his finger at *those* other people, we still haven't learned what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

At some level every human being knows that there is a higher standard governing him or her, the universe, and everything in it—a standard higher than our own wishes and desires, higher than any human wishes and desires.

It's why all human cultures have some kind of religion—and some kind of moral code. Of course, the content of these religions and these codes vary greatly, but all cultures have them, and that says something. The French philosopher Rene Descartes says that God has put an awareness of himself in every human being much the way a painter signs her painting—"this is my work of art, my creation, my masterpiece; this comes from me."

Of course we can—and often do—make ourselves oblivious to this innate awareness of God or of anything higher than ourselves. We can—and often do—act as if we are the highest thing in the universe, as if we are God. How was it that the serpent tempted Adam and Eve? "Eat this, and you will be like God." Or as Protagoras put it: "Man is the measure of all things."

And yet try as we might, this sense of a higher standard—a standard higher than ourselves, a standard that we fall short of, a measure by which we are measured, and to which we don't always measure up—this sense stays with us. You could even say that it haunts us. It's why all human cultures and religions have some kind of sacrificial system. No matter what you sacrifice and no matter how you do it, you sacrifice to make up for your falling short of that higher standard, to appease God, to win God's favor, to put things right between us and God.

Of course, we don't sacrifice bulls or rams or even the first fruits of our harvests anymore. We're civilized: we throw people under the bus. *Those* people. Figuratively speaking, of course. We try to make ourselves look good by looking on them with contempt, and encouraging others to do so, especially God.

Figuratively speaking—at least, for the most part. Although this has to be said: looking on certain people with contempt can lead to verbal violence (calling them "snowflakes," "deplorables," or "the enemy of the people"). And verbal violence has been known to lead to physical violence (Dr. Ford and her family are in hiding right now). And this has to be said, too: The first step towards treating people inhumanely—towards verbal and physical violence—is to deny their humanity. The second is to think that God agrees with us in denying their humanity. There are no further steps required. In the long run, we all lose—and ultimately what we lose is *our* humanity.

But let's turn this around for a moment. Let's go back to the beginning.

The first step towards a morally decent human life—and it's no small step—is to recognize that there is a higher standard governing us, the universe, and everything in it—a standard higher than our own wishes and desires, higher than any human wishes and desires. Along with wanting our thoughts, words, and actions—who we are—to live up to that higher standard. It's a step we all struggle to take—time and time again throughout our lives.

The second step is to go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. There are no further steps required.

But what does this mean: *I desire mercy and not sacrifice*? Well, start here: God is merciful. Yes, God is just, too. But insofar as we distinguish justice and mercy (and such a distinction may have no place in God's true being) but insofar as we distinguish the two, God comes to us *in mercy*. It's a refrain that runs throughout the Bible, starting in the Old Testament:

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

God comes to us in mercy. BUT: We have difficulty believing that—at least believing it all the way down. What we tend to believe, like a default drive, almost unconsciously (perhaps because we are haunted by the awareness that we do not measure up?) is that God comes to us in wrath, comes to us as an exacting taskmaster, demanding some kind of recompense, some kind of sacrifice for our falling short. And so we throw *those* people—whoever we define them to be—under the bus, as we try to make ourselves look righteous by looking on others with contempt, and calling on others—including God!—to join us in that. It's a wonder—perhaps a grace—that our politics aren't more viscous than they already are.

But *what if* we took our identities not from trying to look righteous at the expense of others, what if, instead, we took our identities—and our hope—from a merciful God, a God who desires mercy? Then, rather than being like the Pharisee trying to look righteous at the expense of others, we might be like the tax collector: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And then, like the tax collector, we might go down to our homes justified, right with God, truly righteous. And that means we would extend God's mercy to others.

Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." First, this means that God is merciful. But second it means that God wants us to be merciful—both to ourselves and to one another, to trust and even delight in the mercy we have been given, and so to share it with others. We would no doubt be better for it, as would our politics.

But what if the ancient, primordial wisdom—what C.S. Lewis calls "the deep magic from across the sea"—what if it's true? What if there does have to be some recompense, some sacrifice to make up for our failing to measure up? What if we do need to appease God, to win God's favor? And what if our deep-seated, haunting feeling that we can never make ourselves sufficiently righteous is true? What if all this is true—what would a God who desires mercy and not sacrifice do then?

Perhaps such a God would make the sacrifice himself on our behalf; perhaps such a God would even himself become the sacrifice—for us. Perhaps, out of mercy for us, the one who has every right to judge, would instead himself become the one who is judged, and condemned, and crucified for us—out of mercy for us. Perhaps, rather than looking at us in our unrighteousness with contempt, perhaps God who desires mercy and not sacrifice would seek us out, make our condition his, become one of us, and become our righteousness—for us, so that we might live.

First John puts it this way:

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.