

Humbleness (based on Luke 18:9-14)

We often talk about God's blessings; about God's abundant joy that He wants to give us. Hardships and persecutions are not the things that God wants to give us. And yet life is full of suffering. Life is full of misery and pain. And how do we, as Christians, encounter those moments in our lives and deal with them? Well, we need to take a look at this parable and discover God's expectations of us; and perhaps learn what it means to be humble.

One of the greatest myths of the Christian life is that faithfulness to God puts us on Easy Street. You've probably heard that if we are obedient, do the right things, participate in the life of the church, say our prayers, pay attention to our families and spouses, do a good job at work, and live a good life in other ways, things should turn out well for us. We should enjoy the blessings of prosperity and moral goodness and face no hardships or struggles.

In fact, in the deep religious collective memory of the United States, there's an approach to piety that suggests that, if a Christian is doing well, then he or she must be pleasing God. If there are problems or setbacks, then there must be sin from which to repent. But life isn't that simple.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, reflecting on the life of Job, asked the question that faithful people have asked in the midst of struggles: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Actually, the way we internally interpret that question in the midst of sufferings isn't quite what the question asks. We often interpret the question, "Why do bad things *only* happen to good people?" And it certainly does feel that way sometimes. Sometimes, even when we strive to do everything right, things work out all wrong.

The Bible provides wonderful testimony to the fact that faithful people confront struggles and hardships – just like everyone else. But at the same time, faithful people find strength from God to move through those struggles and overcome hardships. The shining example of blessing in the midst of hardship is, of course, Jesus – in his life, death and resurrection. And His followers find strength in the midst of struggle and help in the midst of hardship.

Those things can come from outside of ourselves. Hardship and struggles can be external. We can do wonderful work and add value to our employer for many years, and we can be, as they say, “downsized” in a manner of moments. We can love in a committed relationship and the other person can succumb to the sin of adultery or the seduction of escape. A loved one can die and leave us alone.

Sometimes hardships and struggles can come from within – they can be produced internally – through unresolved sin, guilt, blame, hidden memories that surface unexpectedly, or deep depression that appears without warning.

The lessons from today’s parable help us understand three things about hardship and struggles in life. The first one is easy to understand. Some hardship and struggle come from sin. That’s part of the old myth that still is around, and some of that myth is rooted in the Old Testament. Before I go any further, let me explain that the word “myth” does not mean the same as “lie” or “falsehood.” There is a core of truth in a myth, but the truth has a spin on it. There is no doubt that when we do sinful or stupid things, hardship and struggle can result. But sometimes we struggle because of the sinfulness and stupidity of others.

We've read from Jeremiah the last couple of Sundays and Jeremiah gives voice to the anguish of the people of Israel who are on the verge of invasion and exile. They know what God's will is and they have the law to guide them, but they willfully choose to go their own way. Jeremiah prays, "Although our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name's sake." (Jeremiah 14:7) The section ends with these questions: "Can any idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O Lord our God? We set out hope on you, for it is you who do all this" (v. 22). In our individualistic society we have long forgotten to pray about and ask forgiveness of our corporate sins. The sins that have been done by our ancestors, by those whom created circumstances that we have to live in. An example of this would be about racism. We live in an America today that, at one point, enslaved a portion of its own people. It wasn't right, it was sinful. Their conditions were deplorable and eventually we righted a wrong by giving them freedom. But there is still a remnant of that sin left in our subconscious and it still causes prejudice and racism today. Due to the long struggle of African Americans and the past that we must take ownership of, we need to ask forgiveness of the sins of our forebears as well as those we commit each day that align themselves along the same pathway. So, as we repent of sin – our own and that of our ancestors – we discover that God will show us the way of salvation and recovery, and we have the potential of a life of blessing. Sometimes we have to acknowledge that we are the cause of the hardships that have come upon us.

As Jesus demonstrates in the parable of the righteous Pharisee and the repentant tax collector, God hears prayers of those who are ready and willing to move out of themselves to find peace and wholeness. Notice how the Pharisee's description of his prayer life is totally self-centered: "I thank you

Lord, that I am not like other people...(please, get over yourself already)...I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.” There is no room for God in the midst of his apparent comfort in his own life and what great things he has done. This Pharisee is far from God, since he uses his blessing as a way to condemn others. Here in the parable, a repenting sinner, a tax collector, understands that he is the cause of his own hardship, and casts his cares and his very self on God’s mercy.

So we learn another lesson: the truth brings a godly perspective to hardship and struggle. Sometimes we think we don’t deserve such challenges in our Christian lives, and yet there are other times we think that we have the corner on them. We lose perspective when we throw giant pity parties for ourselves. One of the great American blues legends, Bessie Smith, sang a memorable song that began with the line, “Been down so long, it looks like up.” Have you ever felt that way? Somehow we think we don’t deserve such hardships.

Perhaps we don’t deserve them, but we never were promised that we would be preserved from all hardships, from all struggles, from all difficulties in life. M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled* writes, “Life is difficult. Most of us do not fully see this truth, that life is difficult.”

And the truth is, life is a journey on foot, not in first class. And if you don’t believe that, you need to go on a mission trip to another part of the world. We have it so easy here in the United States, that we have a warped sense of struggle. For some, the struggle here in the United States is getting out the door by 7:30 in the morning to drive themselves to work in rush hour traffic, usually in a car that’s no older than five years. And during your eight hour work day, you’ve made a mere \$150.

Compare that with some of our Mexican friends who have a three hour drive to work that they share with seven other people in a beat up pick-up truck that's nearly twenty years old. And in their eight-hour work day, they've brought home an exuberant \$24.

Okay, so it's all relative. But the truth is, life can be difficult. There are struggles. There are hardships. There are difficulties to overcome. Some of those are thrust upon us. Others are self-made. When we confront the truth about life and the truth about ourselves, we can move forward to what God expects of us; to face struggle and hardship with clarity that God can help us in our time of need.

The apostle Paul points out the third truth about struggle and hardship in our Christian lives. And that is, that God gives strength for struggle and hope in hardship. In all the trials Paul is put through, arrested, stoned, capsized, ridiculed, he doesn't try to escape struggle, nor does he rail against hardship. Instead he says, "I have fought the good faith. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." He is at peace with himself and the world around him regardless of what has happened to him, regardless of what has been thrown his way.

Paul's peace was in Christ Jesus, whom he knew sat at the right hand of God. Because Christ had endured his suffering, Paul knew that he could endure any and all things through him that gave him strength. Paul knew that God would provide the strength, the serenity, and the reward for endurance and perseverance.

Like Paul, we should not waste our time and energy complaining or withdrawing, but face hardships and struggles squarely, precisely because we know that God will give us the strength we need to get through.

God's expectation of us is not to listen to empty words of self-praise and adoration like the Pharisee who was so full of himself that there was no room for God, but instead for us to become like the tax collector, humble before God, so that God can hear our struggles, to feel the beating of our breasts so that God can fill us with fortitude and victory. AMEN.