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## The White Elephant in the Room

A conversation with Rodolfo Galindo, Contributing Editor, and Mike Walton

Mike Walton : Is racism alive and well? The problem in this conversation is that we as the white majority do not understand that the issue of racism is not an entity that exists outside of us, but is a problem inside of us. We don't perceive racism within ourselves nor in our environment. Therefore we don't speak out on it.

Rodolfo Galindo: Minorities are not taken seriously when we speak out on particular themes or subjects that concern diversity and racism. I am seen as the disgruntled minority that causes trouble or rocks the boat. I am considered a controversy seeker with a pre-planned agenda, infusing the agenda into the issues we try to bring up. The truth is that when I say anything about a subject of social justice or diversity I am seen as representing a one-sided issue that empowers a particular people group. So if I, or any other minority representative, addresses the concerns of our minority community, the community I represent thinks "He is helping to empower and encourage all of us" whereas the other side, usually in the majority camp, will say "he is empowering them." In this language we notice that there is a slight difference in thought and yet it has huge ramifications. The one that thinks we're empowering an "us" mentality believes this is to the benefit of all. The other side believes that "empowering them" reflects a mentality that is "you vs. me." You are being empowered and by being empowered are lessening my empowerment. Lessening the power a person has as a member of the majority is seen as an attack and thus a fight to keep power ensues. Though the majority won't say this, this subtle superiority complex does not need to be told outright for the people to be practicing a life that reflects a hidden attitude. We all live out of these hidden mental frameworks, or worldviews. We don't have to consciously think the "how and why of sitting on a chair," we just do it. It is the same with racism or prejudice.

Mike: You are very close to the issue, however I think that we as the (white) majority often grow uncomfortable with this language of empowerment. We often believe that we are only watching out for what is fair for us.

There are two definitions that I would like to go after. The first definition is prejudice. Prejudice with regards to race is having a strong bias towards your own ethnicity with a strong dislike of people outside your ethnicity. Usually minorities fall into this camp. It carries no power to carry out an agenda. Racism, in contrast, is something much more powerful than prejudice. It is prejudice on steroids, it has the power to influence and move any particular agenda forward. Like prejudice it is also biased towards a particular ethnic or racial group, but it adds a superiority complex that can actualize its agenda more easily. Usually racism lies with the people group in the majority, as they have the power and influence to affect society.

Rodolfo: There are two kinds of racism, but first a clarification. Racism, in my

experience, is similar to what you said though my definition is broader. I think that racism is something that can be both seen and unseen. It is pervasive and covert. Racism is a part of our worldview or the mental framework that we live out. I am not aware, in other words, that I am a racist, unless I come into contact with or am confronted in a relationship where I am exposed as a racist. This is why racism is so widespread and so pervasive, because we do not see it in ourselves. We need others to expose it within us and like all sin it is prevalent. Therefore, as we are all sinners, I believe we are all racist. Total depravity my friend. This definition allows for the humility needed when talking about this issue. If we are all in the same boat then we can all, with humility, begin the process of reconciliation.

The two kinds of racism are aversive and subversive. Aversive racism is KKK, Neo-Nazi racism. The violence is concentrated, controlled, extravagant, lavish and hateful. It is front-page news. This is the caricature of what racism is, the most wide-spread personification or perception of racism. In fact it is the least dangerous in our present context. Although you have cross burning and lynching, the violence is not as wide-spread. The second kind of racism is subversive. Subversive is the most-widespread in practice, but not the most acknowledged. Many who practice this would be the ones who say "I'm not a racist." In fact the reason it is so wide-spread is because it is covert in the sense that we don't sense it, as it is indoctrinated. It is in fact part of our way of living. We are socialized and enculturated into a society where it is the norm and the mores support the norm. Since it is a part of our everyday life we do not notice it, just as we don't consciously have to think about how to breathe. We practice it without knowing it. We use aversive racism as a scapegoat. It is a way of escaping ourselves. We struggle to look at ourselves beyond the generalization that we are sinners. We neglect to admit such particular sins as "I am a sinner with a pornography addiction." In the same way we also struggle with admitting our racism or prejudice. Society is built in such a way that it perpetuates racism or prejudice. We only need to look at our society in the U.S. and see that there are particular people groups who are the "have's" and "have not's" that are specifically positioned or chosen to live as such. Whether as a minority or as a white person, you can look at society as you grow up and without having to be taught by your parents you know what social class you fall into. It is a lesser form of a caste system, a semi-Victorian class system with a capitalistic drive.

Mike: I agree. Prejudice and racism are practices. We are raised or grow up learning them. If you can't admit this concept, there will never be any true change, because if you can't admit it you will never be able to take a true step forward against the underlying issue. The point is that the problem isn't in the world outside of me the problem is me. The issue is that we, I mean white people, feel that the problem is no longer an issue. We look around and we say "look at all the things we've done to fix the problem." We say we have black or Hispanic friends, but as a need to qualify our non-racism. The fact that we need to have such a qualification indicates that the problem is still there, hidden. The need to qualify our racial relationships is proof of our sin. Most people may not agree with this, but I believe it is true. At issue is the fact that you are using racial identity to prove something about yourself. This is apparent in me when, after making the claim I

have black and Hispanic friends, I still respond differently when I am approached by a group of black males and a group of white males on the streets of Chicago. It is apparent when I tell my brothers of color that they are reading too much into a situation when they tell me they have to worry when pulled over by a police officer; worrying about being pulled over by a police officer has more to do with the color of their skin than a traffic violation. I never have to ask myself this question, a privilege I enjoy due to the color of my skin. My White Privilege.

Rodolfo: Sins or things like white privilege are shaped directly in association with our world-view or mental framework. The hidden attitudes from which we live create a mental-framework that communicates one's elevated status as a person over others. The problem is that you receive what your expectations are, but others like myself who are in the minority aren't able to have those same expectations met because of who we are. Those who have always had those expectations met are not able to understand their brother's experience when their expectations are not met. They don't not see the problem because they do not experience it.

I was in the parking lot at my old college. I was the leader of a Christian ministry for the college. I had just gotten into my car and was giving a ride home to a member of our ministry with a mental handicap. A fellow leader who was white got into his car to leave at the same time as me and was a row over. We were the only cars in the lot. A cop pulls into the lot and pulls behind my car so I can't get out. He approached me in the vehicle and tells me I had been speeding. I hadn't even turned on my car! He tapped on the window with his baton. I told him I hadn't even left the parking lot and so couldn't have been speeding. He told me I was arguing with him and then told me that my plates were expired. I told him my plates were current and then he asked me to get out of the car. He pushed me against the car, spread my legs and my arms. So I'm there and I'm scared and he searches me. He doesn't find anything. I had my back to the cop and I heard my friend's voice from behind me asking the cop, "Hey! What are you doing to him!" I was startled to hear my friend's voice filled with anger and fear. As I turned my head to look at my friend I saw the officer had his baton raised as if to hit me. If not for my friend that night I could have been in the hospital or worse; has that ever happened to you as a white person? That is white privilege.

Mike: The first thing I think when I hear this story is that it is over-dramatized. My gut-reaction is "that would never happen." It is because of my fallen nature that I assume that because this has never happened to me, or happened to people like me, that this could never happen to anyone. This problem, then, is not the sin outside of me but the sin inside of me. We try to identify sin as being something we don't do anymore. We attempt to conquer our sins through mental gymnastics and diluted definitions.

However, what this accomplishes is that we think we have conquered a particular sin as we have described it. We think "I don't gossip, I just talk without their knowing, to help them" or "I don't look at pornography, I just enjoy the scenery. I check out the women at the mall and enjoy the fine 'assets' God gave her, but I don't lust." Again, it is about

defining sin in a way that makes me feel good about myself because I can claim I am no longer a sinner, praise be to God! It becomes a critical part of the mental framework we live from.

This is where our struggle with racism is currently at, we define racism in such a way that if I have a minority friend or champion a minority issues or cause than I am not a racist, but God's instrument of change. However what this doesn't get at is the underlying issue that is still inside of me. When I am approached by a group of black or Hispanic men on a back street in a large city, as opposed to a white group of individuals, I think I am just plain S.O.L. That is my racist attitude.

Rodolfo: That is the point, you don't think it happens because it's never happened to you. You base your experience on the group of people that you hang out with, who are mostly like you in appearance, and assume that since they have never experienced it either, my experience cannot be valid. White privilege allows you the benefit of choosing to not interact with minorities at all. You don't have to go to a particular place to interact with them, but I as a minority have no choice but to interact with the white majority. Some people reading this article are probably asking how this applies here at Calvin Theological Seminary. At CTS we see an example of white privilege in action because I can't help but interact with groups of white people. The majority of white people at CTS have the choice not to interact with groups of people like me (Latino-American) or other minority groups.

The staff, faculty and students are mostly white with the exception of international students. International students, though do not necessarily have a history with the white majority of the United States and Canada. They are therefore perceived to be, though never bluntly told, that they are the model or ideal minority. African Americans and other minorities from America carry more baggage. We are perceived as being harder to "get along with," but I think that is a given because of the history. The same rule applies when you do something mean to your spouse and its been six months since you have spoken to him/her and not given them an apology. Do you think that she will not also be "hard to get along with?" This is why I believe we need ethnic diversity in all institutions, especially at CTS. The reason is that if we cannot effect change at the seminary, how can we expect to change the hearts and minds of the Church? An anti-racism policy? An anti-racism workshop? An anti-racism committee or office? Racism and prejudice are ultimately fought through inter-ethnic/racial relationships. If this is not being done in our seminary community, how will it be done after seminary?

Mike: Are we here at CTS free of this problem? Free of this issue? Unfortunately, in many cases I would have to answer a resounding "no." I am still continually battling the subversive power of racism on my soul and can see it play out in the interaction I and others have with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. It is only when we fall on our knees before our Lord, admit our brokenness and ask him to help us move forward that we can have victory over this issue. A doctrinal statement or anti-racism policy will never bring us to our goal, an examination of our own heart.

Rodolfo: To change we need a contrite heart led to repentance and a mind open to see the fallen world for what it is. We will never see certain sins, including racism, so long as institutions and professionals both young and old don't actively seek to increase ethnic diversity in environments that are predominantly one race. If there is no dynamic ethnic diversity in our schools, churches and institutions that have a history with the white majority in America then there is ignorance of personal racism. Is this the case at our school? If the environment does not change its homogeneity it will stay ignorant to racism. The fundamental question at hand is "am I a racist?" This question can not be asked with integrity if you are not in relationship and in constant exposure to people utterly different from yourself and your race.

## To Better Know a Neighborhood

By Brian Bork, Contributing Editor

Now that the higher-ups have magnanimously whittled down the Seminary workload by 19 credits, it's fair to think that most of us have some spare time on our hands. It's always nice to spend one's leisure out of the house, and since many of us live in close proximity to 28<sup>th</sup> Street, it's safe to assume that a good portion of this free time is going to be spent there. In light of this fact, it behooves us all to remember the proverb "idle hands are the devil's tools" and consider the propriety of our time spent there. Given our interest in sanctification (or at least ordination), do we really want to while away our inestimably valuable free time on that conurbation of junk corporate architecture and late capitalist largesse? Is it prudent to spend a Saturday afternoon in its big-box banality? Do we really want to snuffle among the troughs at Applebee's or Chili's? (an affirmative answer to this question demands another: Why do you hate yourself *so much*?). Is 28<sup>th</sup> street the virtuous choice?

I suppose that's kind of hard to say, and maybe I shouldn't make a moral call on the matter. I will say this, though: it's not the *best* choice. There are wonderful places in this city – neighborhoods, parks and business districts – which have their own culture, heritage and character. We learn from Prof. Leder the importance of land in the Old Testament, and the situation isn't any different for us, now. Grand Rapids is a blessing and there's all sorts of urban pleasure just waiting to be experienced. I know this might seem like an implausible claim, seeing how much this poor city has been eviscerated by freeways and distended by yawning suburbs, but it's true. Sure, the character of GR's neighborhoods might pale in comparison to that of other cities - we don't have the battlegrounds of Dublin's Donnybrook, the bangclash of jazz modernism in Harlem, or the posh stiffened upper lips of Notting Hill in London. But there is character in this city, and it's not to be found on the street numbered 28. While we at the Kerux don't want to tell you what to do with your time, we do want to give you a little "heads-up" about the cool neighborhoods not far from your doorstep. We'll take 'em one at a time.

It's always a good idea to hold forth on terrain that one knows well, and for that reason, I'm going to start off this series by telling you about my neighborhood: East Hills. The region, bounded on the north by Fulton, the south by Wealthy, the west by Union and the east by Fuller is actually a conglomeration of six smaller neighborhoods, two of the most significant being Cherry Hill and Fairmount Square. It's something of a recovering neighborhood – it wasn't too long ago that it was disheveled with crime and other less than savory urban issues. Absentee landlords abounded, and wonderful late-19<sup>th</sup> century architecture of the homes was sullied by the decaying buildings and empty storefronts that teetered in their midst. But things are turning around, and the neighborhood no longer looks like a mouthful of cavities. The stoic columns are being restored on the front of the DA Blodgett building on Cherry, and plucky landscapers have arrived, introducing all manner of shrubbery on formerly threadbare lawns and rich coats of paint on old wood

siding. It's an exciting time to live here, thanks to new investment, a burgeoning industry of locally owned shops and restaurants, and the dedication of residents who refused to hand over their neighborhood to the encroaching blight.

One of the great things about the neighborhood is its walkability. This is a characteristic that's frighteningly sparse in the newer regions of Grand Rapids, so if you feel the need for a promenade unmarred by exhaust fumes or fear of being hip-checked by a yowling Honda Civic, come on by. And this is the perfect time of year for it, too. Stately oaks and maples are dropping bushels of leaves on the sidewalks, just waiting to be shuffled and crunched by your Doc Marten's.

A good fall walk works up the hunger pangs like nothing else and, thankfully, there are plenty of places to munch on good food in the neighborhood. The best places may be in the "East Hills Business District," which lies at the intersection of Lake Drive, Cherry Street and Diamond Avenue. The Cherie Inn has some of the best breakfast in the city – perfect for that lazy Saturday morning/early afternoon. If it's a little later in the day, pop into "The Green Well," a brand new gastro-pub which promises fare created from local and seasonal ingredients. Try the barbecued pork with andouille sausage, served supine on a luxurious bed of creamy polenta.

If you take a slight turn to the east, on the corner of Lake and Diamond is the East Hills Center ("of the universe" says the sign out front), which contains one of the tastiest and most affordable culinary delights that the city has to offer. Marie Catrib's restaurant is part bakery, part deli, part breakfast nook, and proof that affordable food doesn't have to taste like a salt-lick or come from the freezer burn section at the grocery store. Her sandwiches are familiar and delicious, and there's enough hummus and baba ganouj on hand to keep you breathing garlic for a week. Try her breakfasts, too, and find out that over-easy eggs are best friends with curried roasted potatoes.

The Lake/Diamond/Cherry nucleus will hold your attention for a while, but try and save some time for a jaunt down Wealthy Street as well. Despite its namesake, the street hasn't exactly been awash with cash in recent years. New businesses are opening up all the time though, but they often have the character of newly-hatched sea turtles making the mad dash to the sea: fledgling, optimistic, yet extremely vulnerable. Sometimes they make it; sometimes they don't.

You have to admire their tenacity, though, and the best way to do that is to patronize them. There are two new businesses opening up in the next couple of weeks that are sure to welcome you with open arms. The Meanwhile Pub occupies the former Two Stans Bar on the corner of Wealthy and Diamond, and will soon be pulling regionally-brewed pints for your pleasure. A red building at 1035 Wealthy is the scene for the imminent arrival of The Stray Dog Cafe, a newsstand/coffee joint and the perfect place to hunker down with some espresso and a copy of your beloved New York Times.

I know I'm making it sound like the only thing to do in East Hills is eat. That's definitely

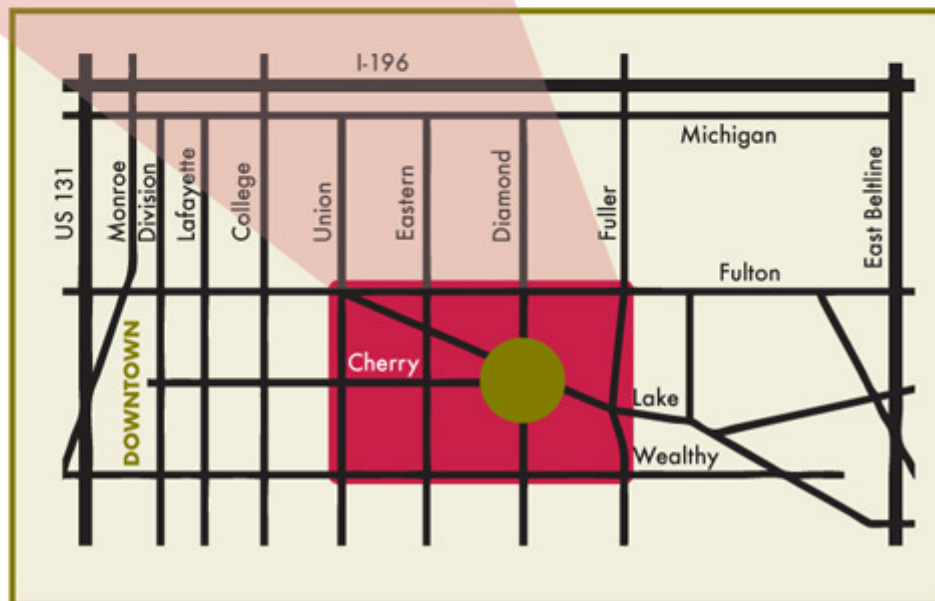
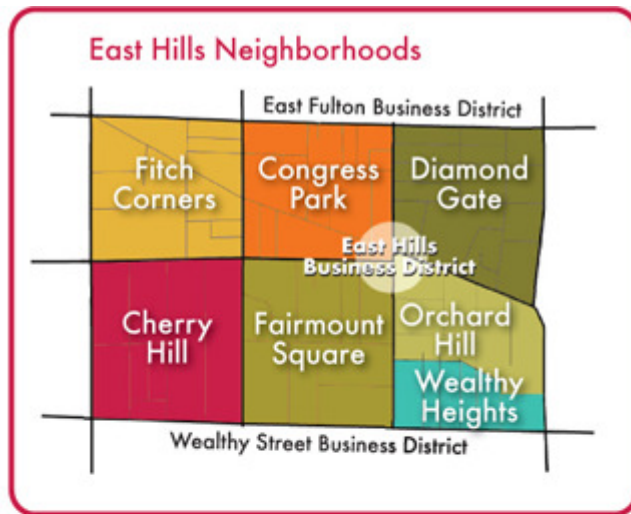
not the case; I just wanted to make sure to tell you about the food first, to ensure that you have enough strength to peruse the books at the Literary Life Bookstore on the corner of Wealthy and Eastern, to learn how to belly dance and do yoga at Armenta Studio (951 Wealthy), or root through the eclectic antiques at Phil's Stuff (722 Wealthy). Also, make sure to check out the lovingly restored Wealthy Theatre for all manner of music, film and stage shows. In the winter, the Theatre is host to a small farmer's market/film series; stop by to learn about animal husbandry and pick up some organic pork butt for the family. There's also the Institute for Global Education (1120 Wealthy), a political reading room with all sorts of anti-war paraphernalia, perfect for posting on the bulletin boards at the seminary. Stick around for a while and read a little; you'll wonder how you ever thought you knew something about American foreign policy without the help of Noam Chomsky. On the drive home, make sure to stop by Art of the Table (606 Wealthy) for a bottle of good wine, and its neighbor, The Wealthy Street Bakery, for a loaf of Challah (perfect for that Hebrew cram-session).

So. There you have it – a brief glance at East Hills. I've not made any attempt to be exhaustive in my description of the neighborhood; there's much more to be discovered. So, please, get out and enjoy your fair city. Even with the pared down curriculum at the seminary, your days are long in the land that the Lord has temporarily given you – make the most of them.

More information:

<http://www.easthillscouncil.org/>

[http://cridata.org/Neighb\\_GR.aspx](http://cridata.org/Neighb_GR.aspx)



# Seen and Not Heard

A sermon by Meg Jenista, Contributing Editor

## Introduction

In France, on December 2, 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned Emperor of French Empire. In keeping with the custom of the day, Bonaparte invited the Pope to join in the festivities. Being that France was a traditionally Catholic nation, most coronations served to prove that the politics of the country were still in submission to their religion. In fact, a coronation was more properly referred to as “a consecration.” In a devout gesture, the Pope was the one to place the crown on the incoming Ruler’s head.

But, on that great day in 1804, as Pope Pius VII rose to place the crown on Napoleon’s head, Napoleon broke with tradition and, refusing to kneel, wrestled the crown away from papal fingers and crowned himself Emperor. In so doing, Napoleon Bonaparte acknowledged that, while it was nice of the Pope to travel all that way, His blessing was wholly unnecessary. In other words, while it might be nice to have God around, God’s say in the matter – eh, that we could do without. The Pope was, as one historian wrote, “there to be seen, not to function.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus, too, knows a little bit about this human tendency to crown ourselves with attitudes and lives rooted more deeply in self-sufficiency than in dependence. He directs this parable, today’s Scripture text, toward those whom Luke calls, “*some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.*”

## Page One – Trouble in the Text

It is lunch hour on a busy Jerusalem street as two men, one snaking his way from the cut-throat financial district and the other stepping from the musty archives of Jewish academia, fight their way into the center of town for this, the most important moment of their respective days. They both arrived at the temple with the same intention. Jews, like this Pharisee and this tax collector, came to the temple in the middle of hectic and busy lives because they knew that *this* was the place where God was. So off they would go to the temple to do business with God. To put themselves right with God. And this is precisely where their similarities end, for each has a vastly different notion of what it means for humans to enter into relationship, into conversation, with a holy and just God.

This Pharisee was the prototype of all that Jewish men hoped to become and Jewish mothers dreamt their daughters would bring home for Sabbath supper. He was polished,

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<sup>1</sup> Englund, Steven. *Napoleon: A Political Life*. Scribner (New York, NY: 2004.) 245.

conducting himself with a practiced and professional piety. His sandals squeaked with newness and confidence as he strode across the temple floor to take up his stance front and center before God. And then he began his prayer, or, rather, something quite like a prayer. Very easily, incrementally, without even knowing it, his relationship with God had become more about himself than about God. His prayer was a spiritual “look at me now.” Tug, tug, tug on the Father’s sleeve.

“Look, I’m here and I’m doing good stuff. Are you proud of me yet? I fast a lot. Twice week. Aren’t I good? And I give you money. Lots of money! All of everything that I make, in fact and, well, I’m a lot better than most people, you know. I haven’t stolen. I haven’t murdered or committed adultery. And I’m certainly not like that pitiful tax collector – well, God, I’m sure you know all about him. He may be a ‘Jew’ but you and I both know what a backstabber he is. Anyway, I’m just here to remind you of all that, God, in case you’d forgotten. Amen!

In the Pharisee’s mind, God, like Pope Pius VII, was there “to be seen and not heard.” While thanking God for being present, in the same breath the Pharisee made God unnecessary. His devotion and pious zeal met the requirements of Jewish law and then some. Assuming he was telling the truth about himself (and since he prides himself on not being an evil-doer or robber, this is a fairly safe assumption) this man really does have a remarkable claim to righteousness.

### Page Three – The Good News in the Text

While our polished Pharisee is rehearsing his litany of self-assigned righteousness, on the far side of the temple, kneels a man who is intimately acquainted with sin, the lifestyle of poor choices that he can’t seem to shake. Far away from the spotlight that the Pharisee claimed, this Tax Collector knows that narrowed eyes are boring holes in his back. He is not oblivious to the elbows nudging and sideways glances. He hears the whispers and they only serve to confirm what he already knows. He has done wrong. When he prays, he sounds a bit like the Apostle Paul who claims to be “*the chief of sinners.*” The Tax Collector prays, *not* “*Lord, have mercy on me a sinner*” but “*Lord, have mercy on me THE sinner.*”<sup>2</sup> The Pharisee may be a man who can do no wrong. But the Tax Collector is a man who believes he can do no right. This tax collector has no righteousness to offer God and so refuses even the intimacy of turning to face heaven. And, empty handed, he cries out to God. He agrees with God’s assessment of his choices, his life, his sin and he pleads for mercy.

And into this life, Jesus speaks. Listen to his radical words of forgiveness: “*I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other, for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*”

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<sup>2</sup> Robertson, A. (1997) *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol. V c1933 by Sunday School Board of the SBC. (Luke 18:13). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

The Pharisee was confident in his own righteousness.

But Jesus says, "*Be careful that you do not fall.*"

The Pharisee looked down on everyone else.

But Jesus says, "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.*"

The Pharisee believed that when it comes to justification, God, like the Pope at Napoleon's coronation, was present "to be seen and not heard."

But Jesus says, "*all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

The tax collector knew his sin and agreed with God's judgment on it.

But Jesus says, "You are not beyond the reach of my grace. There is justification for you." Justification is the proclamation of our righteousness, our ability to stand before God with a clear conscience. The grace of this text tells us that God is present in our lives not simply to be seen but also to be heard, actively proclaiming our righteousness because of and through the work of Jesus Christ.

## Page Two – Trouble in Our World

This parable will sneak up on you, if you aren't careful. Like the gift of a Trojan horse, we invite the parable in. Why not? The Tax Collector is human and loveable in all his vulnerability. And it's easy enough to dismiss the Pharisee by creating a caricature of him. Stop a minute and evaluate. As we hear this story, the role of the Pharisee is, in our minds, one part high falutin' bishop in scarlet robes and bejeweled fingers, one part multi-million dollar televangelist and five parts Christian friend who promised us her prayers but never once came to visit, all flavored with just a smattering of pastors who have, at one time or another, hurt and offended us. It is so easy to imagine this Pharisee in the likeness of the religious people who have done us wrong.

And so we confidently pray, "Lord, I thank you that I am humble, that I don't insist on having things my way. I thank you that I am not like that arrogant, self-important, self-glorifying, obnoxiously hypocritical Pharisee. And I'm just here to remind you of that, God, in case you'd forgotten. Amen!"

And, in that moment, the Trojan horse opens up and hits us with unexpected guerilla warfare. We are trapped by the realization that maybe we also fall under the umbrella of this parable's intended audience "*those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.*"

Neil Plantinga quotes, "We ought to consider the possibility that in our own religion, 'what presents itself as a . . . virtue may be, in terms of (our) motive and function, only an egotistic vice dressed up in its Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Plantinga, Cornelius. *Not the Way Its Supposed to Be*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1995.) 111.

By initially failing to see our participation in the Pharisee's self-righteousness, we too are wresting the crown away from God, holding it rapturously in our own hands and lifting it to proclaim ourselves righteous. And this propensity – well, let's call it what it is. Let's call it by the name Jesus gives it. This *sin* is ours.

Growing up in the church, I often heard adults whispering and, when adults whisper, children listen. What I would hear them say is, "Have you heard about Jim and Jane? Well, they are living in sin." Early on, I wasn't sure what that meant but I knew it was pretty serious indeed. Everyone would say what a shame it was and then they'd move on to more pleasant topics, perhaps a bit relieved and proud of the fact that at least they weren't "living in sin." Funny how the phrase, "living in sin" has come to mean only one thing in Christian circles.

This parable gives us a different definition of "living in sin" which, you may be surprised to hear, has very little to do with activities that shock fine, upstanding church-goers.

Sin happens when we live out of the belief that we're just fine on our own. They are "living in sin" but our children are well-mannered, we put in face-time at church on Sunday morning, we clean up alright, and all our theological ducks are in a row. Believing that we are just fine is, ironically, the ultimate definition of "living in sin."

#### **Page Four - Grace in the Text**

Maybe you started off thinking you had more in common with the Tax Collector and then there's this pride that seeps in and, all of a sudden, you've come face to face with your Pharisaical tendencies. Well, which is it?!? Are you a Pharisee or a Tax Collector? You could drive yourself crazy with the dilemma. But this parable is not really a matter of figuring out whether I am, or whether you are the Pharisee or the Tax Collector in the story. The truth is that we are both<sup>4</sup> because this parable isn't about two separate people. It's about the tug-of-war that goes on inside each of us. To paraphrase Paul in the book of Romans, "*So I find this law at work: When I want to be a humbled Tax Collector, that old, hardened Pharisee is right there with me.*"

And, of course this tug-of-war seems to be the perpetual state of our spiritual reality. Coming to the realization of our need happens over and over again in our lives. If you convert to the faith, the "sinner's prayer" is an obvious example of what it means to throw yourself upon the mercy of God. But even those of us raised in the church have moments when the shiny veneer on our piety dulls. When our confident façade crumbles and when we are left with nothing to do but cry out to God.

Can you think of a moment in your life when, out of desperation and need, God showed up with enough mercy and grace to soothe your tattered soul? A time when you realized

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<sup>4</sup> Van Ryn, *Meditations in Luke*. Loizeaux Brothers (Neptune, NY: 1953) 256-258.

your need for God in an altogether new way and God's strength knelt to your weakness? A time when you were done "living in sin," finished with the illusion that you could manage just fine on your own, and finally willing to abandon yourself to the merciful arms of God.

Just as, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father rushes to throw a robe on His Son, so God is eager to crown us with righteousness. And this coronation is not based on a Pharisaic sense of our own ability, but entirely on our need as it is met in the righteousness of Christ. For while God proclaims, "*all those who exalt themselves will be humbled,*" don't miss that God also promises that "*all those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, this is an amazing love story. A God who flips the tables so that the weak are made strong. A God who mends the broken pieces of this world until they are whole and holy again. A God who exalts the humble. You can't make stuff like this up! This is an amazing love story.

Would you pray with me?

*Son of God, we kneel before you this morning and confess with open hands and hearts, "Lord, have mercy on us for we are sinners." Christ of God, we praise You for Your divine love that reaches into the most vulnerable, broken and humbled places in our hearts. You have saved our lives. You have freely forgiven our sins. Yours is the voice we need to hear. Please speak to us of grace. Amen.*

*Kerux will be featuring student sermons throughout the coming year. Please submit yours to [letters@kerux.org](mailto:letters@kerux.org).*

# My Heart I Offer Unto Thee

By Scott Elgersma, Guest Poet

We've been told for years  
That our hearts are ours.  
Hold them close,  
Share them not.  
A man stands alone.  
Share it with your God, but only just.  
Just enough to  
get in the door of heaven.  
Just enough to  
get forgiveness.  
Just enough to  
get some comfort from the guilt.  
Share it with a woman, but only just.  
Just enough  
for her to open her heart.  
Just enough  
for her to open her mind.  
Just enough  
for her to open her body.  
Share it with the world, but only just  
Just enough to  
write a check.  
Just enough to  
shed one tear.  
Just enough to  
calm the fear.  
Share it with a brother, but only just.  
Just enough to  
share a beer.  
Just enough to  
watch the game.  
Just enough to  
shake a hand.  
A man stands alone.  
Alone is cold.  
Alone is hard.  
Alone is scary.  
Alone is...alone.  
I am not my own.

I have no heart that's mine to keep.  
It is my God's for him to use.  
All to  
give him glory.  
All to  
do his will.  
All to  
share his love.  
It is my bride's for her to know.  
All to  
help her grow in love.  
All to  
forgive my failings great.  
All to  
be sure of above all else.  
It is the world's for them to hear.  
All to  
speak when the truth is rare.  
All to  
stand when other's fall.  
All to  
go to when the way is dark.  
It's my brother's for him to see.  
All to  
comfort when the burden is great.  
All to  
direct when the path is lost.  
All to  
count on when temptation is real.  
My heart I offer unto all of thee.  
It is not my own, for I belong...  
Not to myself, but to him and all he loves.