

St Michael and All Angels

Ōtautahi / Christchurch

26 October 2025 / 30th Sunday Ordinary Time

Homily

Luke 18:9-14 NRSVUE

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 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.

12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13 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!’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Thank God, I am not like other people

Have you ever felt annoyed or outraged by a particular event or person?

The incident might have taken place in your local community, on the world stage, or even within your own personal life. In your frustration, you may have subconsciously thought, ‘if only everyone were as rational and good as I am, with well-considered, balanced social and political views, then everything would turn out fine. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.”

Or perhaps you have found yourself in a church setting listening to a lively homily about the moral corruption in the world, especially among political leaders and society’s blatant disregard for our shared social contract of fairness. And you have found yourself thinking, “quite right, and what’s more, those people sitting in the pew in front of me really need to sort out their values and priorities, like I have.” “And so, God, I thank you that I am not like other people.”

In today’s gospel, the Pharisee, who trusts in himself while looking down on others, exemplifies these very themes when he says, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” Although the Pharisee is convinced of his righteousness because of his religious practices, in reality, his pride and self-confidence distance him from God’s justifying grace. Since God’s grace naturally attracts those who recognise their need for his divine life and love, and therefore call out for help.

Furthermore, although the Pharisee has mastered the posture of a pious religious life, he has failed to see that his performative worship counts for nothing, because true worship—the kind that pleases God—requires repentance and a lifelong attitude of humility.

Faith in God as a transformative practice

Now, on one level, seeking the Christian virtue of humility seems relatively straightforward; however, another perspective warns us that this journey could become a spiritual minefield, because what begins as genuine self-reflection can quickly turn into self-obsession. C.S. Lewis writes, “A person is never so proud as when they begin to seek an attitude of humility!”¹

There is sometimes a misconception that humility is a form of weakness or a sign of a lack of confidence, but this is not true. From a biblical perspective, humility is the acknowledgement that God is the source of all life, wholeness, and goodness. And by turning away from God and relying on our own strengths, we begin to separate ourselves from his fullness of life.

Additionally, practicing humility, as the Tax Collector does, means we begin to understand who we are ‘in Christ’ and who we are before God. Thus, it allows us to recognise our dependence on God for his grace and loving mercy.

Another way to understand the benefits of humility is to see it as connected to the Christian virtue of meekness. Once again, humility and meekness are not signs of being weak; instead, they are the exact opposite, as biblical meekness is best understood as ‘strength under discipline.’ Consequently, the two biblical figures that are often described as humble and meek are Moses and Jesus. The Book of Numbers states that, “Moses was very humble, more so than any other person on the face of the earth.”² While in Matthew, Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and in me, you will find rest for your souls.”³

¹ Christianity and Culture in Christian Reflections

² Numbers 12:3

³ Matthew 11:29

As such, both Moses and Jesus convey the idea of ‘strength under discipline.’ Because the New Testament concepts describing humility and meekness more accurately depict a powerful military horse trained to respond to a rider’s command.⁴ The horse’s inner strength is not removed, but rather its power is disciplined and channelled for the purpose of submitting its will to that of another. This characteristic is evident in both the lives of Moses and Jesus.

Furthermore, our gospel illuminates the premise that the Pharisee and the proud people “who trusted in themselves” saw going to the temple to worship as a type of reaffirmation that they were good in the eyes of God and other fellow believers. Subsequently, their proud stance prevented them from seeing faith in God as a transformative practice.

In other words, our faith in God and our acts of worship mean very little if they do not lead to the transformation of character and heart. “God loves you just the way you are, but he also loves you too much to leave you the way you are.” This popular saying reflects the belief that God’s love is unconditional and accepting of people as they are. However, if the love we speak of comes from God, then it is always moving towards healing and restoration.

⁴ In his commentary on Matthew Barclay notes that the Greek word *πραῖς* (*praus*) is used of tamed animals. e.g. a war-horse—which “has learned to accept control” and so describes a person with “every instinct—under control.”

<https://medium.com/@erikbrown267/weve-misunderstood-the-lesson-of-the-meek-inheriting-the-earth-3c3114f22620>

The “meek warhorse” analogy originates from interpretations of the Greek word *praus*, found in the New Testament, particularly in Matthew 5:5. The concept connects the biblical idea of meekness with the training of warhorses in ancient Greece, as described by classical authors like Xenophon. While biblical scholars generally agree that *praus* means “power under control,” there is debate over whether the ancient warhorse example is historically accurate or a later, illuminating illustration. Xenophon (c. 430–354 BCE): In his treatise *On the Art of Horsemanship*, the Greek historian and soldier Xenophon describes the training of horses. The interpretation suggests that the horses that met the high standards for war, retaining their fierceness while submitting completely to their rider, were described as *praus*. Some scholars, like Marg Mowczko, have investigated the direct link and concluded there is no clear ancient evidence that explicitly equates the military term *praus* with a “meek warhorse.” Her research indicates: Ancient writers like Xenophon used *prau-* words to describe tamed, gentle, or mild animals and people, but not necessarily in the specific context of battle-ready discipline. The connection may be a later interpretation used to illustrate the powerful, counter-cultural meaning of biblical meekness, rather than a direct translation of the ancient term’s military usage. Ultimately, whether the warhorse is a perfect historical representation is debated, but the analogy of “power under control” as the core of *praus* remains a fundamental aspect of its biblical interpretation.

Exalted to the right hand of God

The final theme from our gospel reading concludes with the words, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” While these words offer us some wise advice, they also point to the larger story of faith: the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. For no one in all creation has embodied the words “all who humble themselves will be exalted” more than Jesus himself. We read, for Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and assuming human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross.”⁵ “Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.”⁶

As such, humility is not weakness but rather the pathway to truth and glory. To humble ourselves is to welcome God’s transforming mercy and to share in the life of Christ. As we follow the one who was humbled and exalted, we, too, receive the promise that those who bow before God will be lifted up by his grace.

Let us pray

Loving Father, free us from the pride that binds us and the self-assurance that distances us from you. Grant us humble hearts open to your renewing grace. Transform our worship into love, our strength into humility, and our lives into vessels of your mercy as we await our exaltation in the life of Christ. Amen.

⁵ Philippians 2:7-8

⁶ Philippians 2:9-11