

**Year C, Pentecost 23**

October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013

By Thomas L. Truby

**Luke 18:9-14**

With Max Lucado's children's book, [You Are Special](#), as the children's sermon.

### **Gold Stars and Grey Dots**

Once upon a time Jesus told a story to those who lived in a world of gold stars and grey dots. It wasn't the real world but they thought it was. Instead of the one world that God created and loved because he created it, it was a dualistic world with good people and bad people; people who had gold stars pasted all over them and other people who had grey dots stuck to them. Of course, people with gold stars thought God loved them more than people with grey dots and they didn't even want to associate with grey dot people. They thought, if God didn't like them, why should they?

Well, in this story two men go up to the temple to pray. At this point they are just the same; simply two men. But then we discover that one is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. To make this story work for us we need to translate it into language that makes it closer to the way people would have heard it in the time of Jesus.

So we will say the Pharisee is a senior pastor; a respected religious leader in the community. And we will turn the tax collector into a drug dealer; someone who took money from others and ruined people's lives. So, two men went up to the temple to pray; one a senior pastor and the other a drug dealer, driving his late model Audi 5000.

The senior pastor, standing by himself and full of confidence in all his gold stars prays this prayer, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people. I live a life where I am constantly awarded gold stars and not grey dots like these other people; rogues, adulterers, or even like this drug dealer. I discipline my body and work out in the gym twice a week and give money to support all the Save the Children's Causes."

Stepping back, we can see he has gold stars gleaming everywhere. He is covered with them and not a one falls off. What is there about him that irritates us?

Now the sorry drug dealer standing in the back corner doesn't even look up as he prays. He is full of shame and looks upon his life with deep regret. He beats his breast and prays, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

With which do you instinctively identify? The question creates kind of a dilemma, doesn't it! Who wants to identify with a drug dealer but we kind-of do. Jesus is clever in his story telling. He wants us to think differently and this is his way of opening our minds.

Here are some questions to think about concerning these two men. 1. Which man has the deeper understanding of the human condition and the character of God? 2. At this moment who is each man's audience, the real "other" they have in mind as they pray? 3. Which one of them is primarily aware of his neighbor and which is primarily focused on God? Also notice which one looks up and which one looks down. It's interesting that things aren't always as they appear.

4. Which man's relationship to God is simpler involving fewer people? With the drug dealer we have the man who is praying, we have God, and we have this man's life full of regret. So there is the man, there is God, and there are all the regrets that he brings.

With the senior pastor we again have the man who is praying, we presumably have God to whom he is praying, but this time instead of regrets we have all the ways this fellow is better than the other people around him. In a sense he brings a whole crowd as he speaks to God and they are all there to show God what a good fellow he is. Even the so-called "bad people" are there to show this to God. God should like him more because he has been so good. He doesn't need God's mercy; he needs God to be aware of all his gold stars.

He is quite sure God will be impressed. In a subtle way he will spend the rest of his life being a people-pleaser in order to keep those stars coming or a people-despiser when he sees bad behavior requiring his grey dots. For our senior pastor giving out grey dots is as important as gold stars. He thinks you have to do both to impress God and other people. Whether grey or

gold, he lives a life of judging others, deciding if they deserve gold stars or grey dots. With this way of living in the world, his eye is almost always on the other people working for their stars or looking to despise them and he doesn't have time to think about his real connection to his creator. His actual spiritual life is quite anemic in spite of all the religiosity.

But what if God is not like this senior pastor thinks? What if the senior pastor's view of God is all wrong, completely and totally wrong? What if God is not about who is better than, smarter than, prettier than, richer than, or holier than? What if God does not discriminate, and does not compare us with each other? What if God is like Eli who loves each of his creations because he created them and his love does not go away even when they get chipped and roughed up? Whew, this is a whole different way of seeing everything. It's kind of scary when you think about it. It sort of turns the world upside down. Could there be another way to think about our lives rather than whether we are good or bad?

It does seem the senior pastor's way of thinking traps him in a dualistic world and causes him despise other people by dividing the world between the righteous and unrighteous, the law-abiders like himself and the law breakers like this drug dealer. Maybe the drug dealer is taking his first step toward the true God Jesus shows us by throwing himself on the mercy of God whose justice extends to all, even to those this senior pastor condemns. Maybe God's justice is his mercy. Maybe God is like Eli in Max Lucado's story and stars and dots don't matter? Maybe they just don't stick when you spend time with Jesus and come to know God's character. If this is true, everything must be rethought and all the assumptions about good and bad, and who is who, go out the window. Is this what Jesus is trying to get us to see in his story? No wonder Jesus is pivotal in cosmic history.

Maybe this is what Jesus came to show us. And the most powerful demonstration of God's love comes from the cross when Jesus prays that God will forgive humans for being so harsh in their judgments. After all, at the crucifixion we judged Jesus and condemned him and we were terribly wrong. Maybe when we point the finger and condemn, we don't really know what we are doing. Could this be true?

We regularly pin gold stars and grey dots on each other but we are not very good at it and much of the time we get it wrong. We don't see the other person from the inside like God does. We judge them from their exterior. And even when we have had the good fortune to have a few gold stars pinned on us, truth is, we all have plenty of grey dots too if anyone is keeping track.

In a strange way we are drawn to the drug dealer because he simply and honestly acknowledges himself for how he acts. He sins, and therefore is a sinner in need of mercy and healing. He can't hide it and knows he needs it. It is all quite simple and just between him and God. We don't have to keep puffing ourselves up to impress anyone. We can just admit who we are and live in peace. God knows who we are anyway. He made us. We can relax into his mercy and trust his care. All is well because of who God is and we know who God is because Jesus has shown us God's character.

From a judgmental perspective, we are all just collections of stars and dots in varying proportion but none of that matter. With God, stars and dots just fall off. God isn't interested in stars and dots; God just loves us. And knowing that we find ourselves changing!

If we know that now, before everything is fully revealed, it makes life easier and we live with less stress. If you remember nothing else from this morning's message, remember this: God is not interested in stars and dots. God just loves us. Thanks be to God! Amen.