

Ordinary 30C 2013
Our Relationship with God
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If someone were to ask you to describe your relationship with God, how would you respond? Would you say that you are in a good relationship with God that could be better? Would you say that you are in a bad relationship with God that needs to be made whole and entire?

No matter how you answer this question, the gospel we have just heard is a sobering reminder that there is something hidden and mysterious about our relationship with God, something that will not be revealed until that day when God's reveals our inner most thoughts.

For example, the Pharisee was confident he stood in a good relationship with God. He could say in all honesty that he was not greedy; he was not dishonest; he was not an adulterer. In contrast to him, the tax collector knew he was a sinful man who had harmed others and broken God's law. He knew that he was a sinner, and so he understood his profound need for God's mercy. He was quite sure he did not have a good relationship with God.

Both men, however, were wrong about their relationship to God. Both men misunderstood how God viewed them. The Pharisee supposed he stood in a good relation with God because he meticulously observed the rules and regulations of the law. And the tax collector supposed he was in a bad relationship to God because he had not done any of these things. But in the end it was not the Pharisee but the tax collector who was "justified.," It was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who stood in the correct relationship with God.

But how could this be? It all seems so unfair. Why did God justify the man who was a sinner and reject the man who was not? Why was one man accepted by God and the other rejected? How did this reversal come about?

The answer is found in the way these two men approach God. The Pharisee comes to God praying to himself rather than to God, boasting of all that he has done. Confident in what he has done, he feels no need for God's mercy. Confident of what he has done, he believes that he has justified himself. In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector comes to God with a profound sense of his sinfulness and so his need for God's mercy.

The Pharisee thinks of himself as different from the rest of humanity; the tax collector understands that he is like the rest of sinful humanity. The Pharisee has no need for God's mercy and so does not ask for that mercy. The tax collector conscious of his sinfulness, begs for that mercy.

Although we may think that we know what are relationship with God is, there is always something hidden, something that will only be revealed when we stand in God's presence. At that moment, at the end of our lives, we will finally be revealed for who we truly are. At that moment we will see and understand ourselves for the very first time. At that moment our real relationship with God will be revealed.

In a recent interview with Pope Francis, the Italian journalist Antonio Spadaro began his interview by asking the Pope this question: "Who is Jorge Mario Begoglio" (the Pope's name). The Pope started at him in silence and then said: "I do not know what might be the most fitting description I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."

The Pope's answer to Antonio Spadaro echoes the words of the tax collector in today's gospel. It reminds us that no matter what we do, what we accomplish, no matter how great our success and achievement, all of us stand in need of God's grace. None of us can say, "I have earned my salvation." None of us can say "I no longer need God's mercy." All of us, no matter how good we may be, stand in need of God's mercy because we are sinners. When we understand this we, like the tax collector, will be justified in God's sight.