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THE TAX COLLECTOR WENT DOWN TO HIS HOUSE JUSTIFIED, RATHER THAN THE OTHER – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 18.9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

"You shall be holy, for Iam holy."(Leviticus 19,2) this is imperative, the request of the God of the Old Testament, and holiness was intended as a rung on the ladder towards God through observing rules, precepts, commandments and religious practices.

Well, strangely this was never said by Jesus . Jesus never, in any Gospel said, "You shall be holy, for Iam holy." But He insisted and continually gave the invitation " Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6,36) Why all this? Luke explains it in the parable that we are about to hear now, chapter 18,9-14 and the evangelist shows us a different orientation.

In holiness the man who is climbing towards God – the goal is God – has the intention of taking mankind towards God. But who desires to carry mankind to God inevitably there is someone who remains behind, others remain excluded. Here is Jesus' novelty, he did not want to take mankind towards God, the stairway to holiness, but He has done something different: He has taken God towards mankind and if on this stairway of holiness man climbs towards holiness he goes towards God thanks to his merits (but not all are able to go or want these merits), in fact

Jesus brings God to mankind, that which counts are not the merits of the person, but God's love that is a gift for all humanity.

A God that does not love mankind in spite of their sins, but for this reason he loves them. This is the overwhelming novelty that Jesus has brought. And Jesus puts it into act with this parable known as that of the "Pharisee and tax collector", and it has a precise indication at the beginning. The evangelist writes that "*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous..*", righteousness means "a place with God _".. *and treated others with contempt:*"

And it presents two opposites of the Israeli society, the Saint for excellence, the Pharisee, a person that, as the name says. (Pharisee means separate), separates himself from the others through the religious practices, observing the laws- almost maniacal - and the person thought to be the most impure, furthest from God, the tax collector, an individual, that even if he wanted to, cannot change his work that makes him impure.

So, the Pharisee in this prayer thanks the Lord more for himself than for others and what does he present to the Lord? He presents to the Lord his efforts to reach him through doing more religious practices than the others. The Pharisee says: "*I fast twice a week;*", but the compulsory fasting was for once a year. No, he did more, he fasted every a week and actually twice.

And he boasted: "*I give tithes..*" , tithes are the offering of the temple of a tenth part of the crops and livestock, to the Lord, "*..of all that I get.*" He does not only pay that which is required but for all that he possesses.

Therefore he is a person that attempts to arrive to God through an incessant and continuous practice, and as we will see overflowing, with observances that God has never asked for. God has never asked these things, God had said through the prophets: "*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'*" (Matthew 9,13)

Well, this man that wishes to go to God and has the ambition to bring mankind to God finds himself excluded. Why? Jesus says in the distance there was a tax collector, a person completely immersed in sin, but still dares to say this prayer: " *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"", using the imperative. He is actually saying, " Be merciful, show me your mercy ".

Now we had on one half the spiritual person, full of his holiness, that offers his merits to the Lord, on the other hand a person with nothing to give, if not his condition of a sinner, from which I repeat, he can no longer loose and shows his misery.

On one side merit, on the other side need. Well Jesus' sentence is disconcerting: " *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.*" Remember at the beginning Jesus had said that the parable was for others that thought themselves to be just and they despised the others. And He presented the just, the Pharisee and the despised one. Now fate is reversed.

The despised tax collector becomes just. "*..this man went down to his house justified,*" meaning a place with God, while the other no. What Jesus presents is a novelty that maybe more difficult

to understand but should lead us to this imperative: the Lord does not ask for us to be saints, because sanctity separates from the others, maybe we will be nearer to God, but inevitably it will keep away the rest of the people (sanctity understood as the observing of the laws, and religious practices.) Jesus asks us to be the Father's compassionate touch for every creature; not loving one for his merits, but for his needs.

This is Jesus' teaching of the good news.