**Thoughts for your reflection from my work this week. (Use this as you see fit)**

1. This simplest meaning of this parable seems to be: *Don’t be like the Pharisee who thinks much of himself. Think of yourself like the tax collector who knows he stands in need of God’s mercy.*
2. Pharisees have a modern reputation as being the bad guys. They are often the people that Jesus is known for calling out for their hypocrisy. But in Jesus’ time, they were the well-respected religious leaders of God’s people in many ways. They were devoted servants of God who were committed to living strictly according to God’s law in an effort to be holy. The problem for them was often that they were so committed to strict rule-following and holiness, that they failed to demonstrate things like love and compassion and mercy for those in need.

Tax collectors *WERE* considered the bad guys in Jesus’ day. This is why this parable would have been more shocking to the original audience than it is to us today. If a tax collector was going to the temple to worship and pray, he was likely a Jew. Tax collecting was a predatory practice - tax collectors were allowed to overcharge people for their taxes and to keep whatever they could accumulate for themselves beyond what the government required. A Jewish tax collector would have been considered a traitor to his people.

1. The Pharisees posture is described briefly and his prayer is long. The tax collector’s posture is described at length and his prayer is short.

The Pharisee was proud. The tax collector was humble. He would not even look up to heaven and he beat his breast.

The Pharisee was proud of his standing with God. The tax collector knew his standing with God and felt remorse.

1. There are a couple key things we learn about God from Jesus in this parable:
2. God is not a God who is impressed with pious acts and feelings of superiority. God is merciful and responds to the needs and honest prayers of people.
3. In the end, God will exclude those who exclude others. Those who exalt themselves over others will be humbled and those who are humble will be exalted.
4. This parable is TOTALLY a trap. “Be careful not to be like the Pharisee… BUT don’t get prideful about becoming like the tax collector either!”

 In verse 14, Jesus tells us that the tax collector went home justified before God - BUT HE DOESN’T KNOW THAT. We do; but he did not. He was not able to go home and be grateful that he wasn’t like the Pharisee, knowing that he was now in good standing with God. We don’t even know if he was going to go out and prey upon other people the next day or if he was going to give up the tax collector gig… this parable doesn’t seek to answer that question. This story serves to tell us about the right way to approach God - with great humility and awareness of our need for mercy. To approach God with pride in ourselves is a dangerous thing!

1. …
2. In his sermon on this text, famed theologian Soren Kiergegaard had three main points regarding how we should be like the tax collector without being prideful about it:

First, like the tax collector we ***stand at a distance.*** When we are alone with God, we realize just how far we truly are from God. We may seek to live a holy life, but to approach the perfectly holy God of the universe ought to remind us of just how far removed we truly are from him.

Secondly, like the tax collector, we ***look downward.*** When we see how much holier God truly is, we realize our own wretchedness. Even on my best day, I should be able to say with the Apostle Paul - “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst.*” (1 Timothy 1:15)

Third, like the tax collector, we need an ***awareness of being in danger***. He asked for mercy because he knew that his sin had put him in peril. If we feel safe like the Pharisee, we literally put ourselves in danger.

A Closing thought (from *Stories with Intent*, a book by Klyne Snodgrass on Parables and my primary source of study for all of this):

**“… the modern-day counterpart of the Pharisee would be welcomed into any respectable community, religious or social, and given a responsible position. It is surprising how much egotism and rigorous devotion will be tolerated if a person is just and clean-living and gives of her or his substance.”**