There’s an old Jewish joke: The rabbi, the cantor, and the shul president are all praying on Yom Kippur, beating their chests and chanting “*Oy, how unworthy am I! Oy, how unworthy am I!*” Then poorly dressed man walks into the synagogue, hears this, so he too begins to lament, “*Oy, how unworthy am I!”* Overhearing him, the president turns to the rabbi and says with scornful contempt, *“Now look who thinks he’s unworthy!”* I thought of this story in light of the Gospel of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Temple*.*

Have you ever been treated with contempt by someone who thinks he or she is better than you? I have a memory of being at an airport and I stopped to look at some books in a store. There was a man with a woman, probably his wife, who was trying to get a look at the same books and he rather impolitely stepped in front of me to get a better view of the reading materials. Rather than make a scene, I walked away. I overheard his wife say to him that he was rude to do what he had done. He scornfully responded to her, *Oh come on, that was wearing a Jet jacket for crying out loud.* I am not if he was mocking the Jets or a middle age man (at the time) wearing such a football jacket, but I certainly felt very unworthy of his righteousness. He was probably a Cowboy fan!

Today, our Gospel gives us a very simple but a direct teaching story from Jesus. A proud righteous Pharisee, says*, O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity --greedy, dishonest, adulterous -- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income*. Do not miss the keys words: he spoke this prayer to himself and not to God. Certainly, it is obvious that this man is full of pride. He sees himself as better than the rest of humanity. Jesus points out that he is not praying to God but boasting to himself about just how very good a person he is. Of course, the irony of the story is that the hearers realize how totally insincere is the prayer of the Pharisee. Jesus does not mince his words: we are told that this parable is addressed to those who were convinced of their righteousness. Such words as these would infuriate many of the religious leaders of Jerusalem that would lead to their dark desire to have Jesus crucified. They do not want the mirror of righteousness held up to the faces.

To further challenge the spiritual vision of many of the hearers of this parable, Jesus then in turn speaks of the religious authenticity of a tax collector. As you may well know, the Jewish tax collectors were seen as agents of the oppressive Roman Government. They were viewed as collaborators and traitors. I have seen on the history channel, when the Allies liberated Europe during World War II, how those who collaborated with the Nazis were often brutally beaten and even killed. Yet Jesus praises tax collector’s prayerful attention to God:  *the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed,' O God, be merciful to me a sinner. ‘I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

A habit that I picked us in first assignment as pastor was to often find myself saying about someone in our parish, *they don’t even go to Church*. I have tried to break this habit because it moves into the category of being righteous and not humble. Of course I want and encourage people to worship God by attending Mass as does the third commandment to *Keep Holy the Sabbath.* Still, any time we see ourselves as righteous, as better than other people for whatever reason, we are entering into the slippery slope of pride that internally voices*, I am better than that person or that group.* Pride is the first of all the capital sins and is a most serious wound resulting from Original Sin. It is not easily overcome, and only the grace of God can help us to see our pride and to pray for the grace to see our own need for his amazing grace. The worst aspect of pride is that we do not need God; at some level we see our good deeds and works, not as graces and gifts from God, but qualities that I have earned and can boast of. I often remind myself and others that the sin that Jesus most preached against was religious righteousness. I have often heard the often repeated beautiful words attributed to an Englishman named John Bradford: *There but for the grace of God go I*. It is easy to say but so hard to truly bring into our hearts. We may see a poor troubled soul sleeping on a street and say those powerful words. But do I believe, truly believe that it is only the grace and love of God that sustains me every day of my life, or might I move easily into internally boasting of my own goodness.

We begin Mass with a penitential right. I am a sinner in need of grace. That is not a simple warm up pro forma prayer of the Mass, but an attitude of heart that enables us to embrace the gift that God has given to a poor sinner such as am I.

The author Timothy Keller captures the core of true humility this way: *The Christian Gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself or less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less*.