

Who are you talking about, Jesus?

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About whom exactly is Jesus talking here? That's a tricky question. Luke tells us that he speaks against "some" who trust in themselves because they are righteous. But we want names.

Traditionally, we have assumed that Jesus was condemning Pharisees, and we have let them stand for Jews in general. But this is deep and tragic irony. Far from condemning all Pharisees, Jesus is using one as an example of *virtue* not yet transformed by the love of God. So again, who are these people?

I was a transplanted Southern evangelical who lived in Chicago during high school. At our church we were very clear that the "some" who trusted in themselves were Catholics. There were more Catholics than Southern Baptists in Chicago, and we did not like that. We held them in contempt because they allegedly believed they could earn their way to heaven by works. Years later I mourn the loss of Christian friendships that I might have enjoyed had my Sunday school teachers not warned me to mistrust the Catholics.

These days I often find myself in the company of so-called progressive Baptists. We're pretty sure that Jesus was talking about fundamentalists, Republicans and anyone else without our enlightened social vision. Luke only tells us that Jesus was speaking about "some." Some people are capable of trusting in themselves because they have done really good things, but unless they are transformed by the love of Christ, even their virtue turns into vice. They wind up holding others in contempt. I wonder who that someone could be?

This is the strange day known as Reformation Sunday. Do we not often tragically celebrate the division of Christ's church on this day? What kind of people celebrate their divisions? We Christians would do better to mourn and repent of our pride and

schism on this day. Yes, we have some serious theological differences to hammer out, but aren't our differences just another occasion for the Spirit to instruct us in grace?

According to Luke, if we can learn the proper disposition of humility and pray rightly, God will hear us, forgive us, justify us and unite God's scattered people again. Perhaps Reformation Sunday needs to be a day of prayer and repentance for the Christian church scattered and divided by nation, class and race. A true reformation would see the church's unity restored, and its people proclaiming God's peace in a warring world. A true reformation would mean no more borders.

It's important to remember that Jesus and his disciples are on a journey to a confrontation. Jesus has been teaching us about what it means to be part of his reign. He's warned us that his reign will not come before there is great passion, suffering and transformation; he has reminded us that we must be committed to prayerful perseverance over the long haul. Now he's teaching us about the dispositions necessary to keep this company of faithful together.

In short, this is not a good passage for Reformation Sunday, if we intend to use it as an occasion to celebrate individual, interiorized salvation experiences, as churches of the Reformation have often done. Jesus is building up his church here as a holy people set apart from the world. His church will be one, holy, apostolic . . . and catholic. We will soon be called to proclaim before all the powers and principalities that Jesus is Lord.

But this is a very good passage if we are looking for hope for Christ's whole church. That tax collector went home justified. He got saved, which in the context of Luke means he was accepted into the company of those whom Jesus is forgiving, reconciling and uniting to endure over the long haul, until the kingdom comes.