

A Pharisee and a tax collector come to the Temple to pray. Jesus says that the tax collector, the one who cried out to God for mercy, left the temple justified, left in right relationship with God.

But the Pharisee, who lived such a moral life that he thought he no longer needed God's help to live it, did not leave justified before God.

With that parable in mind and with our fall pledge campaign starting today, I have just one point to make: a faithful relationship with God and your money is an ever-evolving thing. A FAITHFUL relationship with God & your money is ever-evolving.

That's why Jesus holds the tax collector up over the Pharisee. The tax collector knows he is still a work in progress, is still in desperate need of God's help. The Pharisee, for all the good he has already done, thinks he has moved beyond needing God's help. But a FAITHFUL relationship with God & your money is ever-evolving.

I didn't always understand this point. When Emily and I came here we were still recovering from the financial upheaval of seminary and we were still learning to control our money rather than let it control us.

So I presumed that once we got control of our money, once we ordered our finances into something generous and ethical, then we were done. Check-plus and on to the next thing. But of course I was wrong. Our need for God has only increased, and I've learned that this year.

Not that we all follow the same path, but often in young adulthood our financial lives are disordered, and so faithfulness looks like asking God to help you be generous ON OCCASION, to be generous WHEN YOU CAN, and to trust that you won't be abandoned in the times you can't do for yourselves.

Then after a few years maybe you start addressing those financial issues and you need God to help you tackle what seems big and scary and complicated, to help you make real changes to your financial life.

You know you need God in THAT season but you think maybe when you get things under control you won't need to bother God with that part of your life anymore.

At least that's what I thought. But now we're in a new stage, one with a little more stability & comfort, and I'm finding I need God's mercy in a new way. Because it turns out that comfort and stability bring new temptations - who knew?!?

Like the temptation to be selfish, the temptation to look down on people whose lives are not as ordered or stable as ours.

"Why can't they get their act together?" you catch yourself thinking, or just like the Pharisee, "I thank God that I am not like other people."

Then there's the temptation to think that generosity & humility might not be as necessary anymore. Because we have it figured out. Because we are secure.

Last week I was looking at a student loan we were taking for James' college. All of a sudden this wicked little thought popped into my head: "if we don't hold back 10% of our income for charitable giving this year, we won't need that loan."

That thought just sat there for a while, whispering to me about how we've ordered our life now, how maybe we don't need to give away a tenth of our income EVERY year because, you know, we ALREADY do so much.

I see that happen to a lot of people in church. You career settles down. After those scary teenage years your children start to find their way. Life

stabilizes and all of a sudden church is less important, humbling yourself before God is less important. Because YOU'VE got it covered.

Sometimes after the season of comfort comes the legacy season. You've had your career. You've provided for your family. You've enjoyed your blessings. Now you want to make a difference in the world.

This season can be so good and holy, but it carries new temptations. Is your legacy about YOU or about God? Is it about YOU or about the people who need help?

In order for the legacy season to be all it can be, you have to humble yourself before God once again. You have to identify and confess before God the sins that creep into that beautiful desire you have to make a difference.

Maybe in that legacy season more than any other we need to learn to truly pray the hardest words Jesus taught us: thy will be done.

Finally, if God is merciful, we come to the last season of our financial life, the one that accompanies us to the grave. What should those last 5 or 10 years of life look like as we slow down and prepare to see God face to face? If we still have resources, what will financial faithfulness look like in our last season?

Is your life ordered for this last season? Have you made the arrangements you need to make? If there will be wealth left over, is it directed in a way that serves the God who brought you this far, or will it just be about YOUR legacy?

Some of you are in this last season. You are the trailblazers showing the rest of us what we need to do. What temptations do you face in this last

season, and how do you cry out, even now, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Be wise. Be faithful. And share your wisdom with us.

For these next few weeks we’re asking you to consider making a financial pledge for the coming year. We’re trying to increase the number of pledges from 151 to 175 because even more than it helps our budget we think that increasing the number of people who commit financially to God’s work in the world is an important way to promote spiritual maturity.

If you haven’t pledged before, or if you haven’t pledged in recent years, I ask you to prayerfully consider it. But underneath all our talk of stewardship and pledges, remember Jesus’ parable.

Remember that no matter how much or how little money you have, no matter how faithful you have been so far in your life, the real work is always to stand before God each new day, with your hand on your chest, just like that tax collector, confessing YOUR ongoing, daily need for God’s mercy.

Amen.