

The Tax Collector



Luke 18:9-14

Year C Proper 25

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
●	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		▲				●	
■	Jesus		●	●	●	▲	■	▲
●	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room		▲					
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples			▲				
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus			■				
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts				▲			
▲	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence				▲			
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples					■	●	▲
●	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past					▲		

Scene 1

{In the aftermath of a sermon by Jesus, the disciples are out amongst the crowd counseling small groups. Jesus wanders around, listening in on the various groups.}

Scene 2

James , Jesus , Peter

{Jesus drops by a session led by James and Peter}

James Rabbi! Would you like to say something to the group?

Jesus No, no. Don't let me interrupt you.

Peter *[to the group]* As I was saying, following the rabbi won't be easy, so don't even try if you don't think you have what it takes. We camp outdoors most of the time. Sometimes we don't know how we're going to eat. And one day, we might mix it up with the Romans!

James We've faced hostile crowds, and highway robbers. Once, we encountered a man who was possessed by demons! But the rabbi had power over all.

Peter You have to have faith. I walked on water once! Just three steps, but that was three more than anybody else ever has. It's that first step that's the hardest. You have to find it within yourself to take that first step.

James As the rabbi here says, the way is narrow, and only a few manage to find it. The question for you is: will you be one of the few?

Scene 3

Jesus , Joanna , John

{Next up is John and Joanna}

John Rabbi! I was just telling these people about the day I met you.

Jesus Please continue. I love that story.

John I was a fisher with my brother by the shores of Galilee, but one day, a greater Fisher came and caught *us*. We'd never met him or heard of him before, but when he came striding down to where we worked by the sea and said simply, "Follow me," we did. Without hesitation. With just one look between us before we left our nets and our families and all the rest of our lives. Now you might ask, "How could you do that? How could you just leave everything to follow a total stranger who happens to say, Come?" All I can tell you is that I saw something in him. Like a man standing alone on a dark plain who sees a light shining in the distance. I've been following it ever since. *[looking at Jesus]* And still it shines.

Jesus Thank you.

Joanna My story is similar. I was once the co-manager of Herod's household, along with my husband Chuza. *[the group gasps and she hastens to reassure them]* Don't worry! I only *worked* for Herod; I didn't share any of his politics. And I'm out of it now. How? Well, in the circles I used to inhabit, there's a kind of yearning for...something, something we couldn't name for ourselves in the days that we sought for it. You could call it Life, or at least happiness. (Yes! You'd be surprised how miserable the rich and powerful can be!) Most of them tried to satisfy the yearning by chasing costly pleasures and luxuries, but a small group, a group I belonged to, instead sought out intellectual stimulation. We were searching for the Truth. And one day, one of us invited the rabbi to speak at a gathering, and as soon as I heard his words, I recognized that he was something greater than any brilliant mind or great achiever we'd ever had among us. There was a subtlety, a mystery, to his words that hinted at something bigger and better than anything I knew. And so I left it all - my position, my husband, my life - in order to find that something.

John To see the light, you have to have open eyes.

Joanna To find the truth, you have to have an open mind.

Scene 4

Jesus , Phillip , Thomas

{Thomas and Phillip}

Thomas *[to the group]* I'm going to let you in on a little secret: I'm not a Believer! *[pauses while the group reacts with shock]* Yes, it's true! I have my doubts about everything the rabbi says, and yet, he accepts me as part of the group. I think it must be that there's something about my skepticism that he values. Certainly, he himself seems to value the questions more than the answers, and often frustrates the others by making enigmatic statements that he refuses to reduce to simplicities. But I love it when that happens, because it shows that this is not a group where everybody has to think alike and parrot the company line. A group like that would be suffocating to someone like me.

{Jesus enters}

Phillip *[giving Thomas a heads up]* Ahem!

Thomas Rabbi! I was just telling these people about my unbelief.

Jesus Ah! I like that about you.

Thomas *[to the crowd]* See? *[pauses while the crowd reacts with delighted surprise]* So if you're a doubter like me, know that there's a place for you here. And now, I'll turn things over to young Phillip.

Phillip *[to the crowd]* "Young" is right! Most people my age spend all their energy on launching careers or starting families, or having as much fun as they can before they have to buckle down to one of those things, but I chose a different path. I decided to work for something bigger than anything else: God's best good for our nation, and for the world. As the youngest disciple (so far!) I'm sometimes amazed at how carved in stone the beliefs of some of the older guys are, but if you're young (or a skeptic like Thomas) you can avoid becoming fossilized like that. I guess what I'm saying is that if you want to join us, it doesn't matter how old you are. In fact, we could use more young blood!

Scene 5

Jesus , Mary , Matthew

{Matthew and Mary}

Matthew *[to Mary]* Are you sure you don't want to say anything?

Mary I'm sorry. I just can't think of anything to say. But you're doing fine.

{Jesus enters}

Matthew Rabbi! We were just finishing up.

Jesus Don't pay any attention to me.

Matthew All right. Well, I guess I could make a few closing remarks. *[to the group]* We live in a wicked world, full of people who don't care about the rules we all need to live by. There are people who hurt others. People who lie and cheat and steal. But just the fact that you're all here, wanting to listen to the rabbi, tells me that you're not that kind of people. You want to follow righteousness. I often

think about the world as divided into two camps, or two armies more to the point. The righteous and the wicked. And I said, "armies" because it *is* a war. We need to recruit more soldiers, so that our army outnumbers the armies of the enemy, but even more than that, we soldiers need to train ourselves, through prayer and fasting, through study of the scriptures and the words of men like the rabbi, through doing good and practicing love every day of our lives, to be the best soldiers we can be, so that some day we can win this war!

{The group cheers.}

Jesus That was very inspirational. But Mary, have you spoken yet?

Matthew She hasn't. I think she was too shy to. But she's been a great support just being here with me.

Jesus *[gently]* Mary, I'd like you to say something to these people. It doesn't have to be a lot. Will you do that for me?

Mary All right, I'll try. *[haltingly to the group]* The rabbi wants me to give a speech, too...but I don't really have anything to tell you. You seem like decent people who didn't even need to come here, but you chose to anyway, and I admire you so much for that. I'm the worst sinner you can imagine, and I'm only here because I had no choice. It was either that or be lost forever. So I'm afraid there's nothing you can learn from me. I'm sorry!

{And she's done. The group murmurs doubtfully.}

Jesus Thank you, Mary. *[to the group]* I hope you paid attention to what she just said, because you won't be hearing wiser words from anybody else today!

Scene 6

James , Jesus , Matthew

{The discussion groups have ended and the crowd is beginning to disperse.}

Jesus *[to the crowd]* Gather around everybody! I have one more parable to tell before we send you on your way. One day, two men went up to the temple to pray. The first was a man who had done a great deal of good for the community and the nation. He was instrumental in efforts to reduce the crime rate, and fought hard to defend our rights and our quality of life against the oppression

of the Romans. He was especially active in combating corruption among the tax collectors, the tools of the Romans. We have a former tax collector among us, in fact, and he can tell you all about that.

James *[to Matthew]* Ha! That's a dig on you!

Matthew *[to the crowd]* He's right. The stories I could tell you of their deceitful ways would make your blood boil!

Jesus *[to the crowd]* The other man who went to the temple that day, was one of those very tax collectors! *[pauses while the crowd boos]* Now the religious leader turned his eyes up to Heaven and prayed this prayer aloud: "O God, I thank you that I'm not like other people. Like robbers, for example, who do violence to others. Or like adulterers, who break faith with their families. But most of all, I thank you that I'm not like this tax collector here, who for the sake of nothing more than vile greed has betrayed his people, doubling the harshness of the Roman oppression by adding his own obscene profits to our burden.

James Down with the Romans and their tools!

Matthew *[suddenly recognizing the story Jesus is telling]* That was the Pharisee!

Jesus *[to the crowd]* "I fast twice a week," continued the man. "I give a tenth of my income to the church. I am a pillar of society!"

James Here, here!

Matthew *[to himself]* How does he know?

Jesus *[in a quieter tone]* Meanwhile, the tax collector wouldn't even look up to Heaven, but instead beat his own breast and prayed silently, "God have mercy on me, a sinner!"

{The crowd goes silent, wondering what they're supposed to make of this turn the story.}

James *[to Matthew]* Huh? What's he talking about?

Matthew *[half to himself]* The hearts of men.

Jesus *[to the crowd]* The question I'd like you all to take home with you today is: which of these men left the temple justified in the eyes of God?

Scene 7

Jesus , Matthew

{After the crowd leaves, a humble Matthew seeks out Jesus}

Matthew Rabbi?

Jesus Yes, Matthew.

Matthew How did you know?

Jesus About what?

Matthew About the temple. About my prayer. About that Pharisee who stood near me! That was months before I joined you.

Jesus My parables aren't about any particular people, and they're meant all people to hear.

Matthew But you got his prayer word for word! Were you there that day? Is that how you know what he prayed? And did you recognize me when I joined you later, and that's how you can guess what was in my heart at the temple?

Jesus Maybe I was there and heard the Pharisee's prayer and maybe I wasn't. Either way, why do you assume the other man was you? You're not the only tax collector who ever repented, you know.

Matthew All right, point taken. *[after a thoughtful pause]* Rabbi?

Jesus Yes?

Matthew I've been thinking...I'm going to change the talk that I give to people after your sermons.

Jesus Oh?

Matthew Yeah. I think that instead, I'd like to just tell them your "parable." May I "borrow" it?

Jesus You certainly may. In fact, feel free to elaborate on it.

Matthew I just might have some details I can add. Thanks!

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