

A lively Christian faith is like walking a narrow trail, with a dramatic fall on either side, a trail with a name Knife's Edge or Tail of the Dragon.

On the one side is trusting in our righteousness, a self-righteousness that is false and leads to contempt for others.

We get this self-righteousness from people who love us, who show us the right way to live and praise us for living in that way.

Before long, we claim a distinction that we think we have earned, that we are not like other people!

On the other side of the trail is a go-along and get-along surrender, a life that cannot be distinguished from one that has nothing to do with Jesus.

Such a life doesn't consider virtue; thinks that how we use our days, bodies, and energy is only our own business as long as nobody gets hurt.

Occasional apologies, to God and to those we wrong, seem enough.

Spiritual danger attends us on either side.

The two characters in Jesus' parable have fallen off either side of the knife's edge trail. The Pharisee clearly had a broken attitude about his holiness of life.

"I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other people."

That's what he thought; notice how "I" is the subject of all his sentences.

His companion in prayer, the tax collector, is in the crevice on the other side, apparently persisting in the sin,

even as he pleaded as for the mercy of God, even as he confessed his sins.

He may have been addicted to the feeling of getting money and could not imagine stopping.

He continued to do what was wrong in the sight of God and humanity, with periodic, ritualistic, apology.

And so if self-righteousness is on the one hand and comfort with and resignation to sin is on the other, what is the path forward?

Very clearly, we are called to an active following of Jesus, to a way of holiness.

It should be obvious, in a study of our calendars, checkbooks, and conversation, that we mean to belong to him and that this belonging sometimes puts us at odds with the regular ways of the world.

Following Jesus is not the same as being respectable; sometimes it is even the opposite. Jesus people care about and spend time with the poor.

They get involved in situations of injustice and suffering.

They live more modestly than they could.

They talk about Jesus at awkward times.

There is something about them, and that something is Jesus.

And so we find the actions of the Pharisee in Jesus' story worthy of praise.
He gives generously to support the temple and care for the poor, 10%.
He fasts and prays and avoids sin as best he can;
He strives for holiness.

We all should.

But the way forward, down the spine of this ridge, would also include the tax-collector's spirit, his cry "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Doing right most of the time does not make us free from sin;

We know that we do good things for all sort of fallen reasons,

that we act righteously to gain the approval of others as much as we do the approval of God.

And so one who seeks holiness, who desires moral excellence, who want to be nearer to Jesus and his will and who still says "God be merciful to me, a sinner," and means it, is on the edge of the knife, walking the tail of the dragon.

That is a true humility.

That is the adventure of life with Jesus, faith in God, and life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We will all fall off this trail on this journey, into self-righteous or moral exhaustion.

We will over-correct like a new driver and send our whole life into one of these ditches.

And God will get us out again, dust us off, and send us on the journey again.

If we persist, we will reach a point where our desire to be holy, our hope to live well, and our knowledge of our sin come together in a unified human experience of life in Christ that is as close to the kingdom of God as any will come in this world.

I always notice in this parable that Jesus says that the Pharisee was standing by himself, off by himself, likely with his eyes closed, a solitary, self-righteous figure, seemingly with no need of anyone else.

And Jesus says the tax collector was standing far off and would not even look up, a broken figure unable to make eye contact with the world.

What if either had looked up, moved down the pew to the other, and begun an exchange of spiritual gifts?

What if a true spiritual friendship had developed, in which the one grew in holiness and the other in repentance?

Perhaps that is why we have been given each other in the church; to suffer each other's gifts and be made by the Spirit a new people, wholly acceptable to God, in Christ the Lord.