

One afternoon a carpet layer had just finished installing carpet for a lady. He stepped out for a smoke, only to realize that he had lost his cigarettes. After a quick, but fruitless search, he noticed that in the middle of the room, under the carpet that he had just installed, was a bump. His cigarettes!

“No sense pulling up the entire floor for one pack of smokes,” the carpet layer said to himself. So, he got out his mallet and flattened the bump. Not long after, as he was cleaning up, the lady came in. “Here,” she said, handing him his pack of cigarettes. “I found them in the hallway. Now,” she said, “if only I could find my parakeet.” Oops. My bad.

Sometimes we know when we’ve made a mistake. Sometimes we don’t. It’s the ones we *don’t* see that can really bite us. The magazine *Mental\_Floss* has a list of the 20 greatest mistakes in history. They include: *The mistake that burned down London*. On the night of September 1, 1666, the oven of the royal baker to the king of England sparked a fire. It wasn’t a spectacular inferno, and it seemed like no big deal at first, but the fire burned for five days. In the end, it wiped out 13,000 homes and leveled 80 percent of the city.

Then there is the mistake that sobered America up. Prohibition in the United States lasted from 1920 to 1933, and during this period it was illegal to manufacture, transport and sell alcoholic beverages. It seemed like a great idea at the time — outlaw liquor, and you eliminate a whole range of alcohol-related social ills. But Americans like to have a drink or two, and Prohibition opened our eyes to the ways in which organized crime will meet this demand in profitable, violent and destructive ways.

What about The mistake that killed John Wayne? Much of the filming for the movie *The Conqueror* was done in Utah’s Snow Canyon, which is located about 150 miles downwind from a nuclear testing facility. At least 91 of the 220

people who worked on the movie contracted cancer, and more than half of them died — including John Wayne.

A spark jumps out of an oven, and a baker fails to snuff it. A well-intentioned ban is placed on alcohol. A movie is filmed downwind from a nuclear facility. These are small oversights, errors and miscalculations that we do not tend to see as major mistakes. But secret problems can hurt us. They can quickly get out of control and kill us. They should drive us to our knees, cause us to do some searching self-examination, and lead us to confess what the Bible calls our “hidden faults,” in Psalm Chapter 19. In other words, they should cause us to admit to God, “My bad.”

This morning Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, addressing it to people who feel self-righteous, and regard others with contempt. In other words, he is speaking to us — average people who tend to see themselves as better than average. Studies show that nine in 10 managers rate themselves as superior to their average colleagues, as do nine in 10 college professors. According to a professor of psychology named David Myers, most drivers — even those who have been hospitalized after accidents — believe themselves to be safer and more skilled than the average driver. “The one thing that unites all human beings, regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status or ethnic background,” notes humorist Dave Barry, “is that deep down inside, we all believe that we are above average drivers.”

Jesus says that two men go up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The natural assumption made by anyone hearing this story is that the Pharisee is the devout person — the good driver! The tax collector, on the other hand, is the sinner, the bad driver. Sure enough, the Pharisee steps away from the crowd in order to maintain his purity before God, and launches into a list of all his religious accomplishments: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people:

thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” In his eyes, he does everything right, according to the standards of the day, obeying all the religious rules of the road. In terms of keeping God’s commandments, he is way above average.

Then the tax collector bows his head, beats his breast, and says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He’s feeling so ashamed that he cannot even raise his hands and look up to heaven, which is the standard position for first-century prayer. The tax collector doesn’t make any boasts or excuses — he simply asks for God’s mercy. There’s no reason to assume that this tax collector is a particularly spectacular sinner. If he were a thief, a rogue or an adulterer, Jesus would say so. It’s much more likely that he is confessing a set of secret, hidden faults — a collection of oversights, errors, and miscalculations that only he would know about.

So the above-average Pharisee boasts, while the sin-sick tax collector says, “My bad.” They both make a connection with God, right? Wrong! In a surprising twist, Jesus concludes the parable by saying, “I tell you, this [tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” The tax collector restores his relationship with God by asking for forgiveness, while the Pharisee moves farther away from God by boasting of his righteousness.

This isn’t what the hearers of the parable expect, however. They’ve been taught that good behavior draws you closer to God, while bad behavior drives you away. But Jesus is insisting that unless we are aware of our secret faults, and humble enough to know that we need forgiveness, we’re going to discover that our minor mistakes can get out of control and destroy us. It’s always better to say “My bad” than to boast “My good.”

Think again of the historical mistakes I mentioned earlier that seemed so small at first, but then caused enormous problems. Prohibition may have been a noble idea, and a spark from a baker's oven may have seemed like no big deal, but both turned out to be huge problems. In the same way, the Pharisee's fasting and tithing seemed noble at first, and his pride in his good behavior seemed to be a minor mistake, but together these factors created a disaster. Without humility, there was no way for him to be right with God! When you trust God, you get God. But when you trust only yourself, you get ... only yourself.

So, what are the mistakes we make, sometimes without knowing it? It's time for us to do some searching self-examination, confess our hidden faults, and say to God, "My bad." One mistake that can really bite us is our failure to see the image of God in the people around us. Step onto a city bus, and you tend to see differences — different skin colors, hairstyles, tattoos, piercings, body shapes and makeup choices. Some of these differences repel you and you step back, just like the Pharisee moved away from the crowd, not wanting to associate with unclean people. But these differences are all superficial, and most don't reflect the true nature of a person. The really deep truth about a crowd of people on a city bus is that they are children of God, created in the image and likeness of God. That is what we *ought* to be looking at.

Another mistake is that we tend to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. Think of the times you have felt your temperature rising as the line at the grocery store move at a glacial pace, and then, when you get to the counter, the checker messes up your transaction. You want to lash out, saying, "Pay attention and get it right!" We're quick to judge others, but slow to judge ourselves — in our own daily work, we go easy on ourselves because we know how hard it is to focus when we are ill, or tired, or distracted by a personal problem. Like the Pharisee in the parable, we see sin in thieves, rogues, and adulterers, but not in ourselves. And

this leads others to see us as judgmental and hypocritical — which is not always far from the truth.

Finally, *we err* when we are not honest with God — or honest with ourselves — about our need for forgiveness. The tax collector saw himself clearly, and he confessed his sinfulness, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” All of this begs the question: HOW do we get to a place where we see the image of God in others, show mercy instead of judgment, and recognize our own need for forgiveness?

No doubt we may have a ready answer for this question. But might I suggest on the basis of our narrative this morning, that the answer lies in a simple prayer, i.e., we should pray it — regularly. After all, how can we fail to see God in others around us when we’ve started our day by praying to God: “God, please show your mercy and grace to me today because I realize I am needy and must rely on your help”? Pray that prayer every morning and you’ll be less critical of others, you’ll look at yourself more honestly, and you will see others with more compassion.

And, let’s face it, that is a prayer that each of us can say, because each of us has an ongoing relationship with at least one of the seven deadly sins — lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Each of us needs to be forgiven, whether we acknowledge it or not, just as the Pharisee needed to be cleansed of the sin of pride when he said, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” It’s time to get honest — honest with God, and honest with ourselves. We cannot go home justified, restored to a right relationship with God and one another, unless we admit that we need to be forgiven.

The opportunity comes to us here in this place of worship, just as it came to the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple — the opportunity to see our mistakes, to confess our hidden faults, and to ask for the gift of forgiveness. And it

all begins with two simple words, honestly spoken: “My bad.” And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.