“Jesus told them another joke,” we are told, “and he told this one to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on others.”

Now, I suspect your translation does not read “joke” but says “parable” instead, but I actually think “joke” is a pretty good translation.

We don’t really tell parables anymore. We tell jokes, but they are much the same thing. Jokes and parables tend to be stories that look at life in a different way, and they can make us wince as well as give us a good laugh.

Understood in this way, we appreciate that Jesus was renowned for his jokes, especially jokes like this one, that had a punch line aimed at those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous…” It’s always kind of fun to skewer the self-important.

“Did you hear the one about the Pharisee and the tax-collector,” asks Jesus, “who turned up at the temple at the same time?” This is a classic opening line for a joke, with two natural antagonists finding themselves accidentally at the same location:

Did you hear the one about President Obama and the President of Iran winding up in the same men’s room?

Did you hear the one about Donald Trump and Bill Clinton winding up at the same gentlemen’s club?

Sorry. That’s a little too immediate. I’ll go back to the first one.
During a visit to the US, the president of Iran runs into President Obama at the men’s room. And Barak can’t resist the opportunity to have a little dig at his Iranian counterpart.

He says, “I hear that Ayatollah of yours doesn’t mind a bit of a drink! I know that he’s against it publicly, but I hear that he keeps a bottle in his bottom desk drawer.” The President of Iran laughs it off and says, “Oh, is that right?”

So, President Obama takes another run at it: “I hear that he has quite a few women in addition to his wives – all quite hush, hush, of course.” The President of Iran laughs it off again, saying, “Oh, is that what you hear?”

So, President Obama tries one final dig: “You know, I hear that your Ayatollah is thinking of becoming a Christian – becoming one of us! Had you heard that?” And the Iranian says, “From your description, that seems to be exactly what’s happening!” OUCH!!

Back to the joke in Luke 18: the Pharisee and the tax-collector turn up at the temple at the same time to pray. There’s no sarcastic dig at the door, but the Pharisee can’t resist making a back-handed reference to the tax-collector during his prayer. He prays aloud: O God, I thank you that I am not like other men: thieves and rogues and adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all I get. I am one of the good guys.

Actually I added that last part. He didn’t say that out loud, but he had to be thinking it. After all, that’s the point of the joke: he was one of the good guys!

The Pharisees were among the very best of their day. While it is true that the gospels paint an unflattering portrait of them, there is
another side to their character. When the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanes (215-164 BCE) crashed down upon the temple, violated the altar by sacrificing swine upon it, and tore to pieces the scrolls of the sacred writings, it was the Pharisees who rose up to protect their desecrated faith.

We should remember that the word Pharisee actually means Puritan; and like our own Puritans they had a long history of courageous resistance. They had saved Judaism. And now with Greece gone and Rome here, with its overwhelming seductiveness for Jewish youth, they were determined to save it again. They believed in God; they believed in God’s revelation to Israel. They believed their Law was an entrustment from on high, and they dedicated themselves to building a dike to protect their people from an encroaching sea of pagan faith and morals.

So by New Testament times Hebrew religion is thriving. Another temple has been built. The Jews are still worshipping the God of their ancestors, living their distinctive way of life, and passing that along to their children. But the Roman occupation of Israel, like the Babylonian and Greek occupations before it, created a spiritual problem, as well as a political one – namely, “How do you function as the people of God when you find yourself in the midst of a Godless culture?” (Does this sound familiar?)

It seems to me that in such a situation there are only four options:

You can fight back. That was the most popular response back then and in similar situations today it still is the most popular response to foreign occupation. One of Jesus’ disciples probably came from these ranks (Simon the Zealot). Yet, as we know, Jesus never encouraged this form of resistance.
A second sort of response to occupation is to go with the flow and compromise; you know, the old, “When in Rome do as the Romans do,” and you collaborate. This has always been a popular response, but again, it was not encouraged by Jesus.

A third possible path was that of escape. The Essenes did that in New Testament times. They are the folk we associate with the Dead Sea scrolls. They moved out into the desert. Some folk still do. This was not a particularly popular response back then, and it is even less so today.

So the only remaining response to the occupation of a politically and spiritually foreign power is that you try to stick it out in community, and try to bring your faith and tradition into that community as best you can, without fighting back in such a way that you compromise the very ideals you are trying to uphold.

This is a hard path, the most difficult option. This is the tough and often mundane, hard-working alternative, where you just plug away over the years by teaching the truth as you see it, by being distinctive in your dress and your speech, and by showing integrity in your dealings with people, such that it testifies to the faith that is in you.

This is the path that was chosen by the Pharisees. And while we know that Jesus gave them a hard time, we also know that of all the different groups that took these different paths I’ve outlined, the Pharisees were the only group with which Jesus dialogued at all!

They were, as the apostle Paul says, “in the world but not of it.” They were distinctively religious people who knew who they were and what they were about. They were the pillars of their community, and historically had held their community together. So, when the Pharisee stands up and prays, “O God, I thank you that I am not like
other men,” he surely was simply telling the truth. He is not like other men. And he certainly is nothing like this wretched tax-collector!

The tax-collector is a collaborator. He is one of those wretched individuals who sees in the tragic occupation of his people a way to make money! He is regarded as a drug-pusher of the ancient world. There were folks who made their entire living out of other people’s misery. So, when we are told that he stands near the back of the temple and bows his head and thumps his chest, and prays “God have mercy on me, a sinner,” what more could we expect him to say? He’s praying the only prayer he’s got!

As a joke, this story from Luke is probably not one designed to generate a lot of laughs. But it does have a great punch line. In fact, New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias suggests that the key to getting the joke in this case is to recognize that by this stage of the story, most of Jesus’ original hearers would have guessed the punch line.

Jesus tells a story about two antagonists – a Pharisee and a tax-collector – who both who up at temple at the same time. And knowing Jesus’ kind heart, his hearers have already jumped ahead to the punch line: I tell you in truth, not only the Pharisee had his prayers heard that day, but the tax-collector did as well. Not only the Pharisee, but also the tax-collector. That’s what they are expecting.

But where the real sting in the tail of this joke comes is that this is not the punch line! Instead, Jesus concludes his story with the statement that the tax-collector went to his home justified, and not the Pharisee. The tax-collector, and NOT the Pharisee.
The tax-collector went home “justified” – and it’s worth noting here that this is the only time in the Gospels that the Greek word *di-ki-o-su-ner* (justified) is ever used. Oh, the apostle Paul uses it all the time when he talks about being *justified* by faith and *justified* before God. It speaks of God’s grace toward the undeserving, but it is used only this once in the Gospels – referring to the tax-collector in the temple. He went home *justified* – a complete man, whole before God, heard and loved and accepted and forgiven, and ready to be accepted back into the God-fearing community on full and equal terms.

The Pharisee, on the other hand and ironically, goes home still carrying the same problems with which he had started out his day. His prayer has not registered with God! Like an e-mail that gets lost in the Divine spam filter, his prayer does not get through!

I once heard a preacher who ended his sermon on this parable with a prayer that began, “O God, I thank you that we are not like the Pharisee in this parable!”

If only that were true! For the problem is that we all wince in painful self-recognition. In our heart of hearts, we know that we are better than other women and men; we *do* consider ourselves superior; we have not sunk to the depths to which others have sunk, and in our better moments we thank God for that.

Scratch the surface *just a little*, and I suspect you will find at least a small Pharisee in each of us. And the only hope for us Pharisees is to make the prayer of the tax-collector our own: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*

Otherwise, *we haven’t got a prayer!* Amen.