

Lord, our God, who has commanded us to pray, grant us that Spirit of prayer, who alone can teach us how to bring our petitions before You in acceptable manner. Cause Your Spirit to guide us, that we seek not self chosen works after our own thoughts, but continue in Your Word that we may be found Your children indeed. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, Ps. 119, p. 299)

[Jesus said:] "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

In Christ Jesus, who not only put our righteousness into practice for us, but completed it eternally for us, so that we may remain hidden in Him in all our words and deeds, dear fellow redeemed:

We like it when we have a good reputation among our neighbors, but Jesus warns about seeking a good name by lying about Him. He said in His sermon on the mount: "Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." (Lk. 6:26) God's Word is not something that finds general appreciation among sinners, in truth, the majority hate what God has to say, especially about their sinfulness. You know this for yourself, whenever your sinful flesh rebels against what God clearly tells you in His Word.

Our text, which comes from the same sermon of Jesus, addresses the hypocrisy of those who made a show of their praying in public settings. The Pharisee in the temple was such a hypocrite, asking nothing from God in his prayer, but purposely calling attention to himself certainly before God and any neighbor, like the tax collector, who was present. But you and I who follow the Lord Jesus, are called to lives of humility so that all our words and deeds

are heard and done in all godly quietness. So you are instructed here to **Hide Yourself in Christ; His Righteousness Is Your Reward.**

I

It is troubling for us to do good things for others when we do not receive credit and worse yet, we hear someone else gets the credit. We can hardly contain ourselves without speaking up in our behalf. We want the trumpet blast recognition when we do such things, especially if it required some personal sacrifice on our part.

Whenever you have spoken up for yourself – “tooting your own horn”, you no doubt felt a bit dirty, as the person you informed raised an eyebrow or two, or rolled eyes or responded with an audible *tsking* or shaking of the head. Such is the reward we get for boastful self-acknowledgments. This is similar to the reward the Pharisee received from God after his boastful list. The humble tax collector with head bowed probably acknowledged nothing let alone heard what the Pharisee said, but was so focused on his own unworthiness even to take note of the sinful boasting of his neighbor.

The futility of such self sought rewards leave us empty. We see this often played out in the plethora of celebrity award shows. With all the glitz and glamor associated with them, the winners will often quickly fade away from the public limelight, sometimes sadly descending into the deep darkness of depression, addiction and even suicide. Part of our sinful desire for praise among our fellowmen is an ever-increasing desire for more, even coming from our own lips.

But this only speaks to our secular relationships with each other, when we observe this in our spiritual lives things get more serious, eternally serious. Again consider what our Lord says about the tax collector as he left the temple in his godly quietness – “this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The other? – the Pharisee did not go to his house justified before God, but rather condemned in his sin. What was his reward for all his prideful boasting before God and men, his empty phrases and many words? – eternal condemnation, since none of his self-acclaimed good works made up for even one of his sins. God preserve us all from such inflated opinions of self.

II

So Jesus instructs us: “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Now the reward is not for our praying, but it is a reward of God’s grace to us through His

Son. Our prayers spoken in true humility come from hearts that trust alone in Christ Jesus. In Him alone we are justified.

With the tax collector we admit to being only sinners, not good people, not even semi-good people, who deserve good things from God. We are sinners who now seek only mercy. Through the faith God has given us in Him we trust that He is all merciful. For our sin we deserve the punishment Jesus bore upon the cross for all people, for all sinners. For our lack of righteousness, which we need to have in all of its perfection to enter into the courts of heaven, we now have the righteous life of Jesus credited to us. This is our justification.

Where is there any boasting? As the Apostle Paul clearly spells out in these familiar words: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Yes, we are to help the needy when given the opportunity. We are to pray in public worship and in private. These and many other things we are to do according to God’s will for us, but they do not contribute in the least to our right standing before God. They merely reflect God’s working in and through us as His justified saints for Jesus’ sake alone.

The tax collector hid his face by the act of bowing. He hid from God in his shame, even before his fellowmen, like the Pharisee. But what was a refreshing reality for him, he was safely hidden in Christ. As he pled for mercy from God, there was Christ, the heart and center of God’s merciful heart. The Apostle Paul puts it this way for all of us Christians: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

There is our reward for a life well hidden in Christ, life everlasting with God in heaven. Jesus also had this to say in His sermon on the mount: “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory – NOT TO YOU – but to your Father who is in heaven.” Far be it that we should bring shame to our heavenly Father who has adopted us through His only begotten Son, but rather that we always bring honor and glory to His name as the only true God, who loves all people through His Son.

So in our lives of Christian service to neighbor we get to be used, underappreciated, even taken for granted. They are lives, after all, hidden in Christ. All self-promotion and boasting is pointless, and worse yet, it threatens the very existence of our faith in Christ alone. Again Paul speaks of your only reason to boast: Because God

by His grace has chosen you to receive of all these eternal blessings in His Son “you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

To the world, as you join with the tax collector in true humility bowing your heads, beating your breasts in remorse over your many sins of self-centeredness, it appears you lack all confidence and are cast into the darkness of despair. But as you approach God your Father in the name of your one and only Redeemer, Christ Jesus, your Lord, you instead confidently go forward covered with His forgiving blood and hidden in His everlastingly perfect righteousness. In Christ alone you are exalted forever. Go now to your homes today boasting in the Lord since you are truly justified for Jesus’ sake alone. Amen.