

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity | St. Luke 18:9-14
August 16, 2015 | Parkland Evangelical Lutheran Church

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, we beseech You so to guide and direct us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may not forget our sins and be filled with pride, but continue in daily repentance and renewal, seeking comfort only in the blessed knowledge that You will be merciful to us, forgive us our sins, and grant us eternal life; through Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*ELH*, p. 161)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' / "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, 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." ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who wins the victory in every field of battle, dear fellow redeemed:

There is no song for second place. The song that the losing team hears when they walk off the field of play is "We Are the Champions." But that song is not for them. They are the losers. It doesn't matter that they are one of the two best teams in that sport. It doesn't matter how many teams they beat to get to the final. They did not win the biggest game of all. Losing, even if it is second place, is seen as a defeat, a failure.

There is no satisfaction in losing. We want to be known as the best. We want others to recognize our accomplishments. We want them to dream about someday, perhaps, experiencing a taste of our glory. Well maybe that's taking it a bit far, but we do like to win. But the victories that seem so important in this life, mean little to nothing in the life to come. In fact, Jesus teaches us that only "losers" will come into His kingdom. He shows us **The Battle We Must Lose If We Would Win.**

I

Before the parable in today's text, Jesus told another parable about a widow who begged an unrighteous judge to give her justice. He ignored her for awhile, but soon grew tired of her continued complaining. He took up her case not for her sake but for his own. Jesus said, "And

will not God [who is righteous] give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night?" (Lk. 18:7). The lesson is that we should not give up praying even when it seems that God does not hear.

The subsequent parable of the Pharisee and tax collector makes a different point about prayer. This one does not teach us about perseverance in prayer, but in having the right attitude when we pray. It is not as if continuous praying will get us whatever we want from God. Jesus said about this, *"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" (Mt. 6:7).* Nor is there some special formula for prayer, that if we use it, we will get everything we ask for. Christian bookstores are full of books that teach this, but it is a lie. God always answers prayer the way He knows is best – not the way we think is best.

So Jesus introduces us to a Pharisee and a tax collector, who both went up into the temple to pray. And what was wrong with the Pharisee's prayer? First of all, he wanted others to see him and to hear his prayer, so that they might be impressed by him. He was like the "hypocrites" Jesus warned about, who *"love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others" (Mt. 6:5).* Second, though the prayer was addressed to "God," and though the Pharisee said "I thank You," it is obvious that the Pharisee's act of worship was directed toward himself and not toward God.

The problem was not that the Pharisee tried to live a righteous life before God. It is the duty of every Christian to keep God's Commandments. The problem was that the Pharisee thought he was righteous by his own efforts, and he wanted God to recognize it. This is in sharp contrast to the tax collector, who felt the weight of his sins. He stood where no one would notice him and whispered the words, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"*

The Pharisee thought he was winning at righteousness, not realizing that *he had already lost.* The tax collector knew he had lost and therefore won. If we want God to hear our prayers, if we would go to our homes justified today, we must lose like this tax collector. But this is easier said than done. From our birth on, we have struggled to win the battle that Jesus says we must lose. This is the battle of our will against God's will.

II

It is still popular today for people to talk about having a free will. "We can choose to do good or evil," they say. But they are wrong. Adam and Eve had a free will in the beginning, but they lost it when they sinned. Because of that sin, all are spiritually dead by nature, incapable of doing any good on their own. Our wills are bound by sin; they are not free. If we believe in Jesus, it is not because we have chosen Him and opened our hearts to Him, it is because God has chosen us and opened our hearts by the Gospel. Even after coming to faith, our will is still not entirely free. The old Adam of sin clings to us fighting every day, tooth and nail, against the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why it is difficult to discern what is driving us at times: Is it a good will sanctified by the Spirit or my sinful will which wants to get its own way?

This also affects our prayers. There may be times that we all but demand something from God, even though He has not promised to give it. It may seem like a good and proper thing, like success at work, particular blessings in the home, peace in the world, but how do we know what will be a benefit and not a hindrance to us and others? We also tell ourselves that we

deserve privileges from God because of our good behavior. "God, You can't give me this sickness and pain! I have lived for You my whole life! I try to follow Your Word! Why are You doing this to me?" Or we pray for help in our trouble, but the trouble seems to worsen. If God is all-powerful, then where is He?

The problem is that we want to force our will on God. We want God to see things the way we do, and help out the way we think He should. When He does not do this, we act no better than young children who do not get their way. Their parents tell them they may not do this, or they must do that, or they will stop, or they better listen, and children often say out loud or under their breath, "NO! I will not listen to you. I don't care what you say. I am going to do what I want."

This is the way we respond to God when His will for our lives clashes with our own. We think we should have what we want, live how we want, and make our own rules. But just as parents must win the battle of wills with their children, God must win the battle of wills with us. Parents must teach their children right from wrong, and God must do the same for us. He must show us when our sinful will deviates from His perfect one, and when our souls are in danger.

III

The tax collector knew that his will did not line up with God's. He recognized his sin. He was sorry for it. He did not try to justify himself before God; he knew that couldn't be done. He submitted his will to God's will, humbly praying for God's mercy. He acknowledged his failure to live a righteous life; he admitted he was a "loser." And Jesus said, "*this man went down to his house justified,*" and that "*the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

Jesus also humbled Himself, but it wasn't because His will was out of line with His Father's. He humbled Himself because this *was* the will of the Father. God's will was that His only Son should suffer and die for all sinners. This was not easy for Jesus to do. "*Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me,*" He prayed. "*Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done*" (Lk. 22:42). The Father's will won out that day, with the result that Jesus did die on the cross for all sin. This includes your sin of challenging the will of God with a sinful lifestyle or bad choices, your sin of refusing to give an inch to your neighbor in love. God forgives you all these sins not because you are good like the Pharisee thought he was. He forgives you because Jesus was your perfect Substitute. His humility covers over your pride. His submissive will cancels out your stubborn one. His loving act has won for you God's mercy.

Jesus was willing to lose His life for your sake. Now He wants you to lose your life for Him (Mk. 8:35-38). This means that He wants you to submit yourself to His Word, gladly hearing and learning it. He also wants you to lose yourself in love for others, not holding grudges or seeking revenge, but showing kindness and charity—especially to your fellow believers in Christ (Gal. 6:10). This is a good kind of losing, when we don't insist on having our way, but rather follow God's way. His way is not the easiest, but it is the one that is blessed.

Jesus won the ultimate battle for us, the battle over sin, death, and devil, and He shares His victory with us by faith. This is why we can be content to lose the battle of wills with God. We do not always head in the right direction or do the right thing. We do not always know what is best. God does, and His unchanging desire is that we join in celebrating Jesus' victory on our

behalf for all eternity. Until we are exalted with Jesus in heaven, God promises to hear our prayers for help when we are struggling with sins of pride and spitefulness. And He promises to answer each of these prayers by sending us to our homes justified, forgiven by His grace in Christ.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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