

You have shown us, heavenly Father, that our salvation in Christ is beyond all human understanding, and confronts man with much that seems absurd to human reason. Preserve us, O Lord, from the hypocritical notion that we can become much better than others, and thus reach a position where we may claim Your blessings and mercies as merits. Open our eyes, that we always recognize that we are paupers in Your sight, absolutely dependent on *the riches of Your grace* for all that we need as Your children. Keep us ever mindful of Christ's death, not for the righteous, but for sinners [like ourselves, in His name we pray]. Amen. (Luther for the Busy Man, ed. P. D. Pahl, pp. 98, 101-2)

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed [Jesus]. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

In Christ Jesus, who justifies us by fulfilling every dot of the Law for us and then sacrificing His perfection for our imperfection, dear fellow redeemed:

When you are accused of wrongdoing, speaking ill or harboring impure motives, how do you normally seek to justify yourself? You may plead ignorance of the Law you supposedly have broken. Or you may seek to reinterpret the Law making your actions, your words, your motives better than the evidence would suggest. Or you may appeal to similar things committed by others, especially by your accuser. Well, we all have to admit that we have many ways to find justification before our neighbors. These are just a few samplings of our desperate attempts to find that ever-allusive justification.

Self-justification leaves us vulnerable, even if we are innocent. The accuser may not so easily accept all such attempts to excuse oneself. We have all fared better when we simply fall upon the mercy of the accuser and seek a gracious heart granting us forgiveness. So our Lord would have us learn this from our text: **Justifying Oneself Leaves the Sinner Alone without Grace.**

Jesus had just told the parable of the unjust manager who was accused of poor management and was about to be fired, but before his departure made arrangements with his master's debtors that he would forgive a portion of their debts. Then Jesus said we cannot serve both God and money. In this regard we read the opening sentence of our text: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed Him."

They were convicted by the Law spoken by Jesus. But they sought to justify their greed and so attacked their accuser. Truly a typical ploy by us sinners to be sure, but Jesus, knowing their hearts and minds, turned up the heat. He said to them: "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

At least twice Jesus called the Pharisees out exposing their feeble attempts to justify their greed. Once in regard to their appeal to the writings of the rabbis who claimed that you could neglect helping your aged parents by declaring a certain amount of your wealth to be dedicated as a special gift to God, which may or may not be in the end given. On another occasion He called them out on their thievery of widows' property while all the time making a pious show with long public prayers of concern for them.

Yes, they were able to fool their many neighbors, but God counted their greed for what it was, an abomination. How do you camouflage your greed today, my fellow sinners? With the recent power-ball lottery, did you hide your greed by declaring that if you won, you would give a sizeable gift to the church, you would generously pay off debts of relatives, even buying them expensive items to enjoy as well? You thought your greed was well hidden even before God. Secretly you were trusting in the god of money to solve all your problems, instead of trusting the one God who has done all to save you.

God knows your heart, even if you are in denial and you can fool others. You and I are tempted to look around ourselves and observe other sinners doing things which put their greed on more prominent display. Among them are thieves, embezzlers, suit-happy individuals seeking to cash in on legal but loveless means of taking wealth away from neighbors. Now that is the greed, which God finds to be an abomination! - you say.

Your trust in lady luck is innocent enough. You merit God's favor because you are not a criminal – gambling is legal after all.

## II

*“But pastor, I thought playing the lottery was not a sin?”* Yes, that is correct, but greed is still a sin. Just like you can be angry but are not allowed to sin by being filled with hatred, so you can gamble but do not sin by being filled with greed. If you cannot gamble without being motivated by greed, then save your money. That little dot of greed, will not be made void through any self-justification on your part; God's Law condemns the love and trust of money.

Now you and I know and trust in Jesus as Savior from our sins against God's holy Law, even our greed, which can so easily consume us. We know we cannot justify ourselves. But let's admit it: you and I often seek to justify our actions, our words and our innermost thoughts and feelings, thinking we can fool God with our many diversions. But the consequences of such activity is eternally devastating.

The Apostle Paul writing to the Galatians pointed this out to them: “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Self-justification is a lonely endeavor. With all our well-rehearsed excuses for our sin, there is no justification found in them. Sadly apart from Christ answering for our sin, the wrath of God abides on us for all eternity.

Consider the parable of the vineyard, the Gospel lesson for today. Even though we are life-long Christians, we can be tricked by Satan into thinking that somehow we deserve God's goodness, as though God is required to overlook our many sins of thought, word and deed, because we have followed Him for so long. Those who have lived most of their lives apart from Christ but in the eleventh hour repented and believed in Christ for salvation alone will receive the exact same reward of grace. God gives to us forgiveness, life and salvation, not because of our earning or merit, but simply because He loves us in His Son.

Grace by its very definition declares this to us – it is God's love undeserved. That God so freely and willingly spreads His love to all sorts of sinners is not ours to control, but to receive thankfully and eagerly seek to speak of it to others. This is what Jesus pointed out to the self-justifying Pharisees in our text: “the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.” Those who drop their foolish attempts

to find their own justification for their sin, hearing the good news that Christ has justified the wicked, all the wicked by His holy sacrifice, eagerly seize upon these blessings for themselves and their many neighbors in their life.

Heaven and earth as we know it will pass away, but the declaration by God that He justified the whole world of sinners in His Son will stand forever. God will never go back on that promise. True, those who refuse the gifts of God in Christ and self-justify will continuously be made to answer for their sins in the eternal flames of hell. But God's promise of complete justification in His Son stands forever.

No one in heaven will be there because they earned something more than others. No one in heaven will be there because others were worse in his/her estimation in this life. No one in heaven will be there because they hit upon the excuse, which found his/her sinful thoughts, words or deeds justifiable. From the least in this life to the greatest will be found in heaven for Jesus' sake alone. Do not stand alone in your sin, you will be forsaken for all eternity. Through faith happily let Christ stand in your place, you then share in His inheritance forevermore. Amen.