

In Nomine Iesu

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity 2022

The righteousness that gives peace and life - Luke 18:9-14

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise 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, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by whose righteousness alone we are saved. Dear fellow redeemed:

The Pharisee in Jesus' parable is an unlikeable character. He doesn't fit the values we hold dear; he doesn't fit the values most people hold dear. He is conceited, self-righteous, and easy to despise. The irony is that it is just as easy for us to look down on him as he looked down on the tax collector. It is easy to get caught in the trap of thinking we are better than he is because we don't think we're better than other people as he does. To avoid that trap let us try to find a little understanding in our hearts for Pharisees everywhere.

I

That said, we too should thank God that we are not like other men, that His mercy spared us from death this day, kept us out of the emergency room this day, kept us from this or that illness or injury, kept us from acting out our most evil desires. God has spared us. We should thank Him this very day. He has kept us from venting what it is we really think of this person or that, and so letting others know what hypocrites we are, how Pharisee-like. God is to be thanked for keeping us from getting hurt or even killed when we did the very foolish, inconsiderate or selfish thing we warned our children not to do. And, as bad as that thing was, God spared us, even though He could have let the full consequences fall on us right then. For this we should thank Him that He has not treated us as we deserve.

But, of course, that is not really what the Pharisee was saying, is it?

What about the tax collector? Obviously, something about him caught the attention of the Pharisee. Something told him, correctly, that the man was a tax collector for the Roman forces that occupied and ruled his beloved land. Surely, he did not have warm feelings for such person. After all, how would you feel if an official representing an unwanted foreign power, who had authority over you, stood in the check-out line at the grocery store in front of you? Or what might you think of that unpleasant looking man who stared a little too interestedly at your daughter or took too great an interest in the contents of your purse or the security code you were putting into the electronic payment machine you just swiped?

You haven't committed the worst crimes this world has known. You're probably not guilty of abusing children or of identity theft. But don't let that tempt you to think that compared to such people you are righteous in the eyes of God. Yes, you may be more righteous in the eyes of society. Perhaps a police officer's eyes will glance quickly away from you, but fasten on others near you; but the difference between your righteousness and that of the person who drew the policeman's attention may have been only the difference between your nice, clean Ford and the other guy's dirty Chevy with a broken taillight.

The true point of comparison in the case of the Pharisee and the tax collector must be seen in the light of God's law, not in the light of a code of violations that draws the policeman's attention to this car or that. In the one case, the policeman let you pass, even though you **too** were speeding a little, but went after the other guy only because of the broken taillight. That's the way it works when it comes to our laws and their enforcement. But in the case of the law that God rooted in our own conscience and recorded in the Bible, how much you have sinned isn't the issue. You have sinned; and therefore, His law condemns you, just as it condemns the guy with the broken taillight, the tax collector in the temple, and the upstanding Pharisee as well! That is why the Apostle Paul writes, "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things." (Romans 2:1)

You see, we dare not feel morally superior to those who look at society with hatred and fear, and act out their hatreds and fears to the harm of others. Indeed, be thankful that God spared you that terrible path, that He gave you mentors in your life to help you make good choices. Be thankful He gave you intelligence, education, self-control, a sense of right and wrong, people who love you, even though you may not be as good as they credit you. We dare not think that we are superior to other sinners. Because all sinners deserve the same thing, tax collectors and Pharisees alike. We deserve judgment and condemnation.

II

This parable is not just a moralistic fable about: "don't judge a book by its cover," or "appearances can be deceiving," or even "don't judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes." No, the lesson our Lord would have us learn, whoever we are, is this: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' enters the kingdom of heaven." Good works, fasting twice a week, tithing of all that you have, are not sufficient. Nor is anything else we could do. We cannot earn our way into God's favor. We cannot bad-mouth others and so by contrast impress God with our own goodness. We cannot redefine sin to suit ourselves, then let ourselves off. No one who trusts his own righteousness will enter the kingdom of heaven. No one! No one who justifies this or that sin will avoid the condemnation God's law pronounces. No, not one! You will not. I will not.

We live in an age where the sins of dishonoring parents and superiors, of aborting unborn children, of engaging in intimacy with someone not your husband or wife, of taking what you have not earned, and of speaking evil of others, are not thought to be serious. Today it is fashionable to defy parents, whether openly or by neglect. Today it is deemed a right to kill a child you do not want, take from others because the law says that you may, speak evil of real wisdom and truly wise people because you fancy yourself smarter than they are. Dear friends, we live in a generation that is going to have a terrible shock on judgment day, as indeed would the Pharisee. So, hear clearly what our Lord says!

Jesus, Luke tells us, "Spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." So, why did the Christian Church in her long history look at His word "**some**," and yet see to it that this text be read **every** year to **all**? Why did she see fit to make sure with her traditions of worship that **we all** would hear about the **some**? Think about it from the perspective of the tax collector. Who did he despise? The answer is plain. He despised himself. And he, our Lord says, "went down to his house justified rather than the other." What is Christ, and His faithful Church, teaching **all of us** about the nature of true righteousness before God?

Yet there is something in the parable even more vital for us to see than the sin of pride that is found in us all, so important that the church decided that these words are to be heard every year **by all**. It is this: The tax collector went back home justified. He went, having been declared righteous by God, because he threw himself upon God's mercy. He knew

that he had no righteousness of his own before God. He looked into his own heart, and like the Apostle Paul, saw no good thing there. He was ashamed of the things he had done, of the lies he had told, of the evil he had thought, of the wrongs he had committed against other people. He hated his sin. He wanted to be a child of God, and not a disciple of Satan. The tax collector wanted to start over, to be born again. But to do that he needed mercy. He needed an escape. He needed a Savior from sin and death to bear the guilt and penalty of his sins and pay for them, all of them. He needed to become a new creation in the hands of a merciful Creator. The tax collector knew he was not righteous, not good. But he knew also that God is all of that and more. God is merciful; and His mercy endures forever. He knew that no one who feels the horror of his sins and longs for mercy in the Savior that the Father sent into the world will be denied. In short, he believed and trusted in the true God, who so loved us all that He gave His only-begotten Son.

The tax collector was justified by God, not for the sake of his humility or lowliness, but for the sake of the One who humbled Himself, taking the form of a servant, placing Himself under the law. The tax collector was justified not for the sake of what little righteousness he could scrape together from his life, but for the sake of the One who came into the world to live for him in righteousness as he could not, and then give His life a ransom for all tax collectors and sinners.

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Dear friends, it is now August, the leaves on the trees and flowers have lost the vibrant green newness of spring. They are beginning to look tired. Fall is coming. So, it is with us also. The more we look at ourselves in the light of God's law, the less value we see in our own righteousness. Our end too approaches. The refreshing, life-giving mercy that is in Jesus Christ is our only hope. It alone makes us new and vibrant. It gives us life.

Christ lived in your place, fulfilling all the righteousness you could not and have not. Then He put Himself under the condemnation you deserve. He was buried in your grave. And then rose from it that you might have His victory. His love is without measure. His grace is more than sufficient. He has come in mercy; and His mercy endures forever. He has fully drained the cup of God's wrath toward you. His blood cries to heaven not for vengeance as did Abel's, but for mercy. Believe as the tax collector, and you too will have peace with God for the sake of the Savior who gave Himself to make His righteousness yours. By faith you abide in His mercy. So, whose righteousness is it that saves you? Now you know. It is His, and His alone. So go in peace to your house this day, for God forgives you and proclaims you righteous for the sake of Christ. Depart in peace. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria