

## In Nomine Iesu

### The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity 2024 Righteous in the sight of God - Luke 18:9-14

“He 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.’”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness. Dear fellow redeemed:

Throughout Jesus’ ministry there was a group of people whose belief in their own righteousness prevented their recognizing Him as the Savior promised in the Old Testament. Yet, despite their rejection, they never quite lost interest in Him. They were the Pharisees. They represented a religious or theological viewpoint within the church of Jesus’ day. They were religious conservatives; we might say traditionalists. They regarded the Bible as God’s word, literally true in all it said. So, they taught and believed that both heaven and hell existed; that all the dead would be resurrected on the last day, those who had done good to everlasting life in heaven, those who had done evil to everlasting death in hell. They confessed the existence of angels, good and evil, including the chief of evil angels, the devil. They were diligent in attending religious services and festivals. They took the law of Moses seriously, attempting to fulfill its every point. They actively brought many into the Old Testament church and exercised great moral influence on the lives of the people. In short, had we been alive in their day, we would have been impressed with their piety and many good works.

Of all the denominations of the Jews, it was the Pharisees who most closely inquired into the teachings of John the Baptist. (cf. John 1:24) They were the ones who most diligently questioned Jesus about His teaching. They came to Him in groups and as individuals, in the light of day and in the shadow of night. Their fascination with Him never really ended. Even in the years that followed His crucifixion and resurrection when one would think their rejection would be final, their most celebrated teacher, Gamaliel, still counseled caution and respect when dealing with the infant Christian Church. (cf. Acts 5:34) One of his most promising students would be converted and become the greatest of all Christian missionaries – Saul of Tarsus. (cf. Acts 22:3) Many other Pharisees would follow Paul into the kingdom of God.

Of all the many different and erring religious parties of the Jews, Jesus clearly spent the most time with the Pharisees. Why was this so? Why did He continue to attract their interest? Why did they continue to receive His time and patience despite their rejection of Him? Jesus said of them: “All the people, including tax collectors, heard John. They admitted that God was right by letting John baptize them. But the Pharisees and the experts in Moses’ teachings rejected God’s plan for them. They

refused to be baptized. How can I describe [them]? What are they like? ... John the Baptist has come neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'There's a demon in him!' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! He's a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:29-30,33-34) They rejected Him; and He knew it. Yet, in the very next verses, we find a certain Pharisee inviting Jesus to his home for dinner, and Jesus accepting his offer! What is going on here?

There are really two reasons why Jesus continued to give the Pharisees His time and attention. First of all - and let us not forget this - they were close to the truth. They believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They considered the Bible His holy word. They regularly attended synagogue and temple. They did many outwardly good works. But they didn't quite find their way home to their God. They were lost sheep of the house of Israel. But, you see, that is why the Good Shepherd just couldn't forget them, even though they sinned greatly and continued to do so.

We move a little closer to home when we come to the second reason. When we think about all the people we know, those who identify with the visible Christian Church as a whole, are we able to recognize who trusts in Christ alone for saving righteousness and who trusts, at least to some degree, in their own good works and character? If we each think about that person whom we know better than any other - ourself - can we honestly say that we have no trace of Pharisaical thinking in ourselves? Can we say that we always give credit to God alone -- that His grace, His mercy, His goodness alone established us in this saving faith and keeps us in it?

This help us to focus on the second reason why Christ gave the Pharisees so much attention: We are so very much like them. That is to say, the Pharisaical way of thinking is the way natural man thinks. Now, because we Christians are undeniably sinful, we labor under the same illusions as the Pharisees. We were born Pharisees, and we will never completely outgrow it. Despite our faith in Christ, pharisaical thinking still clings to us. We can easily find evidence of this in ourselves if we just examine ourselves. Consider for a moment. Aren't we at times judgmental toward others? Aren't we quick to take offense at the slights others seem to give us and still quicker to excuse ourselves when we are the ones slighting? Aren't we masters at identifying sins in others and nearly blind when it comes to our own faults. Aren't we quick to question the motives of others, and quick also to defend ourselves. Aren't we even stubborn and prideful about defending ourselves, to the point that even when it is clear we are wrong, that we did or said what we shouldn't have, we still find a way in our hearts to justify ourselves?

Why did Jesus spend time with Pharisees? Why did He choose the story of a Pharisee and a tax collector to illustrate self-righteous unbelief before God? Why? Because He came into the world to save sinners. He came to redeem natural, fallen man. In other words, He came to save Pharisees. He came to turn proud Pharisees, devious, clever Pharisees, into tax collectors. So, whenever we find Jesus dealing with the Pharisees or telling us a story about Pharisees, we ought to devote extra attention to His words, recognizing that He is speaking about us and, most importantly, He is speaking to us.

We are gathered here today in the name of Jesus. We know from His own word that He Himself is here in our midst. We stand before Him with all the thoughts of our heart known to Him, all our well-worked out justifications for why we've done or not done this or that thing more obvious to Him than our foolish excuses were to our mothers when she stood before us with the evidence of our wrong doing in her hand. We stand before Him with our history completely uncovered in all its embarrassing detail, unhidden from His eyes however well we've hidden it from the eyes of all those around us. In short, whether we know it or not, we stand before Him even now as Pharisees as He points us to the tax collector.

Dear friends, if we readily see ourselves in the conscience-stricken tax collector, we have missed the meaning of Jesus' words. We are not him, for he is a picture of faith so pure that it could arise in no human heart. The tax collector is the very picture of trust that holds captive the very heart of God Himself. The tax collector is the picture of the faith that is "not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:9)

We are the Pharisee. And with these words, and the picture they paint, Jesus would show us the hardness of our heart, and its overflowing pride. He would expose the thoughtlessness with which we come into His temple to stand before Him. He would open our eyes to the great truth that though we may think that we have invited Him into this our house, it is He who must serve us, or we are lost. With His words He desires to break our very hearts as we look at the multitude of our sins and our own prideful self-righteousness. He would force us to the ground before Him in shame, guilt, and despair ... where in tearful sorrow we hear Him say, "Your sins are forgiven ... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

In the tax collector you see faith so pure and beautiful, so despairing of itself and yet so single-minded in its determination to cling to the grace and mercy of God alone, that it could come only from God. He must create such faith in our hearts with His word of truth. He must serve us a full portion of the ugly, unflattering truth about our sins and our self-righteousness, until sickened of it we turn to the only source of that which is good and truly nourishing. As St. Peter said, "Therefore laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious." (I Peter 2:1-3)

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We are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of our sins, so that we might be born again, as Jesus told a Pharisee named Nicodemus so long ago. We have heard the word of truth, in which God breaks us down with the relentless hammer blows of His law and then gently restores us with His gospel. In the absolution we heard today, we received from the very mouth of Jesus, the Lamb of God, the forgiveness of our every sin, just as did the tax collector. Now we have heard the preached word as well. And soon, very soon, we'll hear the final blessing, the benediction, and see the sign of Him who was crucified for us placed once more before us. And, by the grace of God, we will go to our homes justified for the sake of Him who came into the world to save sinners, even Pharisees like us. Amen.

**Soli Deo Gloria**