

Get to Know Yourself Better

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

August 20, 2023

Luke 18:9–14

One thing we must have when we gather Sunday for worship is to hear the Word of God, and along with that, to hear it preached. We hear three readings from God's Holy Word: an Old Testament reading, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel reading. The Bible was written a long time ago. The books of the Bible were written by human beings just like you and me and written to human beings just like you and me. But these prophets and apostles who wrote them were inspired by the Holy Spirit. God had them write not just to the people back then but to everyone, and that includes you and me. So we hear it read and we hear it preached.

In the Gospel reading before us today, what do you hear when Luke says that Jesus spoke a parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and who looked down on others? Maybe you're thinking, "That's not me." You may very well know of others it does apply to. Do you get the week off from listening to that passage of the Bible and this week's sermon? Do you have to wait till next week and hope that the Word of God on that day applies to you and that the sermon addresses your particular situation or need?

We've all experienced it where the readings for a particular Sunday don't seem to apply to what's going on in our lives. Some sermons may be applicable to others but it just doesn't seem to be speaking to you on that particular day. The thing about the written Word of God is that it is not only the words of human beings to certain people, it is the inspired Word of God and it is to all people—including you. Even if it doesn't seem like it. So it's okay if you find that you do not trust in yourself for your righteousness, Jesus is speaking this parable to you. The last thing you might think to do is look down on others. No matter, this parable applies directly to you.

There were two men. They shared Jewish ancestry and they expressed their Jewish religion by going up to the temple to pray. But it is how they are different that really stands out. One was a Pharisee, the other was a tax collector. The Pharisees were religious leaders and spent their time in the Scriptures and living according to the Scriptures. They were authorities on the Word of God and were widely recognized as examples of moral living. The tax collectors were employed by the Roman empire to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. The Romans did not take over the Jewish nation but they required taxes from them. They would employ people in that area to collect the taxes. It was bad enough that a fellow Jew was collecting tax from you for the evil and pagan Roman emperor. But as if to pour salt on the wound, tax collectors were notorious for collecting more than the Romans required and pocket the extra. The Pharisees were good people. The tax collectors? Not so much.

So when Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector, you know you're going to hear a good story presenting the Pharisee in glowing terms and exhorting you to strive to be like him. By contrast you will be warned about falling into the evil deeds of tax collectors and you will vow to not be like them.

But what does Jesus show us? The Pharisee He describes is full of himself and trusts in himself that he is justified, that is, he is in right standing with God. His prayer is that he is grateful to God that he is not like other people—you know, the bad people. The ones who do all those bad things like cheat people and act unjustly and commit adultery. He is most pleased that he is not like that guy over there, that, that tax collector. Yes, the Pharisee knows God is pleased with him because instead of doing all those evil, wicked things, he fasts and he tithes. He refrains from what God condemns and obeys what God commands.

And how does Jesus present to us the one that's not such a good guy, the tax collector? Jesus describes him as so ashamed of himself he stands off to the side. He can't even bring himself to be in the presence of those who certainly deserve to be there in the temple. He can't even lift up his eyes to God. He beats his breast and pleads to God for mercy. I am a sinner!

What is going on here? What kind of a lesson is Jesus teaching? Shouldn't the person who lives a good life be the one Jesus holds up for us to emulate? Shouldn't we hear from the mouth of our Lord that we should strive to stay away from wicked activities and do the things that are commanded by God? Shouldn't we rightly look down upon those who are corrupt and harm others?

That's not what we get from Jesus. According to Him the Pharisee who trusted in himself for his justification was not justified. It is the tax collector who despaired of himself, he is the one who was justified. Jesus says the one who exalts himself will be brought down but the one who humbles himself will be raised up. Jesus is not speaking His parable to you to impress upon you to be a better person. You need to repent. You need to confess your sins and you need to turn from them. You need to get over yourself and all the good you do and how you are better than others. If the worst sinner you know is not yourself you need to get to know yourself better. There are many religions, all telling you that you need to live better, act better, be better. You don't even need religion for that, there are thousands of self-help books, seminars, and YouTube videos telling you how you can improve and that you should be a better person. Jesus tells you to repent. See yourself for who you are. You do not just sin, you are a sinner.

What you do, and even what you don't do, is only part of the story. It is what is in here, in your heart, that is the main problem. Do you honestly believe you can look up to heaven on the basis of your own goodness? Do you really think that by comparing yourself to others you can convince God that you're really not that bad? Jesus knows you better than you know yourself. You do trust in yourself for righteousness. You do think there are worse sinners than you are. You fail to fully see the wretchedness of your heart. In your standing before God it is not about how worse others are, it is about you and what you need. Humble yourself and look within at the shame of what you have done and what you have left undone. There is one thing available to you.

That is mercy. Pray to God. Be merciful to me, a sinner. Jesus Christ was not a Pharisee, but He far surpassed the moral and upright Pharisees. He was without sin and did not look down upon anyone. But He humbled Himself, He went to the cross, making it a temple as it were. He offered up a prayer to the heavenly Father. It was His own life—His sinless, guiltless, perfect life, shedding His blood in pure sacrifice for your sin, for every person's sin. This is why God has mercy on you though you don't deserve it. It's not because you're good. It's not because you're better than others. It is because of Christ.

In our Scripture readings today we hear of another Pharisee. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees. But what did he proclaim to those Christians in Corinth? In the Epistle reading he says that he delivered to them what he had received. What was it? Christ, who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, who was buried, who rose on the third day according to the Scriptures. He wrote this to those Christians back then. But also to you. This is what you have, nothing of yourself. You have Christ alone, and He is why you are justified. Amen.

SDG