

Eleventh Sunday After Trinity, A✠D, 2008

Luke 18:9-14 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ 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!' ¹⁴ 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."

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Two men went up to make an offering. Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the ground. Any offering, he assumed, would do. It didn't matter what kind. As long as he brought an offering, God would be pleased. Cain looked over at his brother Abel, who also brought an offering. But instead of a bloodless sacrifice like Cain's, Abel brought the firstborn of his flock—the choicest lamb he had. See, Abel knew the lesson God taught his parents when they tried to cover their sin with fig leaves. Neither leaves nor bloodless offerings can cover sin. God clothed Adam and Eve with skins—taken from an animal at the cost of its life. And Abel brought an innocent lamb to be sacrificed as his offering. So the Lord regarded Abel's offering and despised Cain's offering. As the writer of Hebrews would later say, "There is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood." Abel wanted his sins forgiven; Cain just wanted to appease God with a good work.

2 Two men went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee—a model citizen and an upstanding member of Jewish society—prayed, "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 I get." The Pharisee looked over at the tax collector standing far off and smugly smirked, genuinely grateful not to be a sinner like this man. And the tax collector, eyes downcast in shame, struck his breast, praying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." See, this tax collector knew what the temple was for. It was the place where sacrifices were made, where the people were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificed animals. The temple was for forgiveness, and that's exactly what he knew he needed. The Pharisee, however, trusted in himself. He had a long list of good works. What need did he have of forgiveness? But God justified the tax collector—forgave his sins—and damned the Pharisee.

3 Two men went up to church. One knew exactly what to do and when. He crossed himself at just the right time and stood and sat without being told to. He was a model churchgoer. He volunteered on the Church Council and was regular at voters' meetings. He gave a full tenth of his income and more if the sermon was short and sweet. The other man came hesitantly. When he thought of himself, he knew he shouldn't be there.

Compared with everyone else there, he felt ashamed. He knew the depth of his sinfulness. Not only did he know his sinful actions; he knew his thoughts, as well. And he knew he was approaching the presence of an all-knowing, all-seeing God. So he struck his breast and prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." And God gave the second man exactly what he wanted: forgiveness. And the first man, who trusted in himself, He sent away without what he truly needed: forgiveness.

4 That's the irony of Christianity. The moment you think you deserve what God offers, you've disqualified yourself from receiving it. If you deem yourself worthy, you become unworthy. If you look at your works and think they're good, they become sins. If you look at others and thank God that you're holier than they are, you become a worse sinner. If you look at yourself and see anything other than a sinner worthy of eternal condemnation, you're not seeing correctly. But the moment you stop smugly comparing yourself to others and start comparing yourself to God's holy Commandments, as soon as you esteem yourself a sinner completely unworthy of forgiveness, your Lord forgives your sins. That's why the Lord gathers His people together: not so that they may compare themselves against one another and feel satisfied that there are "worse" sinners, but so that He can forgive their sins. If you're not here to get your sins forgiven, you'll leave condemned like the Pharisee.

5 So repent. Repent of trusting in yourself, of thinking of yourself as righteous, of treating others with contempt. Repent of esteeming others as worse sinners than you. Repent of paying more attention to your so-called good works and ignoring your sins. Your eyes alone can see your selfish motives, your lustful desires, your angry spirit, your prideful thoughts. And so in your own eyes, there is no worse sinner than yourself. Beat your breast and pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner." For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

6 Everyone, that is, except one. The Lord Jesus humbled Himself in order to exalt others. One Man went up to the temple to be the sacrifice. Looking at both men, He mourned for the Pharisee and the tax collector alike. They were both equally sinful, but only one knew it. They were both, as St. Paul says, dead in their transgressions. So He humbled Himself. He, the Son of God, the eternal Second Person of the Trinity, the Divine Word of God, humbled himself to be born of a Virgin. He humbled Himself to endure mocking and beating. He humbled Himself to be hung upon a tree. He humbled Himself to take the world's sins—the tax collector's, the Pharisee's, Cain's, Abel's, St. Paul's, yours—upon himself. He humbled Himself unto death, so

that you might be exalted. He shed His blood to forgive your sins. After all, there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of His blood.

7 That's right. Jesus died to exalt you, to raise the head of the tax collector and say "I forgive you." Here, as the Lord has gathered you, is the forgiveness that you could never deserve, the forgiveness that you so desperately need. The liturgy teaches you to pray like the tax collector. "I a poor miserable sinner confess to you all my sins...Lord have mercy...Thou that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy...Create in me a clean heart, O God...Forgive us our trespasses...O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us." The liturgy gives you no room to be proud of yourself. Instead, it points you to the One who came to exalt you with His forgiveness.

8 So He does. Through the same liturgy, He declares to you: "I forgive you all your sins...the Lord be with you...The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus...Take eat, take drink, for the forgiveness of your sins...Depart in peace...the Lord be with you...the Lord bless you and keep you...and give you peace."

9 Sinners take heart. None is excluded. The Lord's forgiveness is for all. You may give up your pretensions and simply receive what you need: forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. All here for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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