

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, A ✕ D 2009

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 the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, a well-respected leader in the religious community. The other was a tax collector, a well-known leech on society, an extortioner among his own people, a traitor, a thief. The Pharisee probably got a warm handshake from the greeters, while the tax collector came in the side entrance. The Pharisee sat proudly and prominently in the middle of the congregation, knowing—or at least presuming—his rightful place among the people of God. The tax collector couldn't decide if he'd be less noticed in the very back or the very front, so he stayed off to the side. The Pharisee 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 tax collector, eyes downcast, struck his breast and prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The tax collector went home forgiven, the Pharisee condemned.

2 Two men went to church. One was a seminary professor, the other a drug dealer. The first made a living by teaching men to be pastors. The other made a buck by enslaving men to his product, by exploiting them, by preying on their addictions. One was a life-long Lutheran, the other came out of curiosity. The professor was well-

respected in the community, serving not only at church but also on various boards and committees around town. He could always be counted on for a charitable contribution, and regularly gave the first tenth of his income to church. He was the person who came to your mind when you thought of a faithful church goer, a model example of a Christian. The dealer was far more awkward. He fumbled through the service, shuffling papers and juggling a hymnal. He felt embarrassed when he looked around him and saw others who didn't even need to open a hymnal except for the hymns. In that silence before confession, the professor prayed, "God, thanks for blessing me. I'm not a bad guy when compared to others around me. I've never cheated on my wife or on my taxes. I come to church regularly and serve as a trustee. I even do a fair job of keeping the commandments." In the same time of silent confession, the dealer silently stammered, "God, I don't know where to start. It seems like the harder I try, the more I sin. Be merciful to me, a sinner." The dealer went home forgiven, the professor condemned.

3 Looking like a model Christian does not make you one. And what you think about yourself matters. The Pharisee used God's Law to compare himself to others. And, in the end, he liked the comparison he made. His sins weren't nearly as heinous as others'. He was a good enough guy. The tax collector, however, made no comparison, at least not to others. The Law leveled its accusation against him, and all he could do was beat his breast, strike at his heart, the seat of his wickedness, and beg for mercy. It matters what you think. If when you think of yourself you think you're a pretty good person, go home now. It won't matter whether you leave now or leave at the end of the service. The end result will be the same. You'll leave condemned.

4 The Pharisee was a faithful temple-goer and yet did not receive forgiveness. Going to church is not the difference between the two men. Everyone who comes to church hears the same words, but they don't produce the same effect. Everyone who comes to the altar receives the same Body and Blood of Jesus, but not everyone receives them for forgiveness. Neither your mouth nor your faith bring about the real presence of Jesus. Only His words do that. But to receive His Body and Blood without repentance and faith, without discerning the Body of Christ, as St. Paul says, is to receive Him for condemnation, not forgiveness.

5 Christianity is not about comparisons. The Law is not given so that you might see where others have failed and you have succeeded. It's quite easy to spot the Pharisee when dealing with someone else's pharisaism. But that's not the point. The point is not to identify that Pharisee, but this Pharisee: the one who dwells within you, the one who naturally wants to compare yourself to others, who impiously thanks God that you're not as wicked as they are. This Pharisee is your heart. So 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. In fact, just as Christ holds up the tax collector as the model Christian for his repentance, so does His Church. Historically, she has added his three-fold breast beating to the Confiteor, the confession of sins at Compline, "my fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault," and also during the Agnus Dei "O Christ, thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world" each time. Like the sign of the cross, you're free to strike your breast or not, but the point is the same. The Church through her liturgy teaches you that nothing good comes from within you; faith and forgiveness—everything good—come from outside you.

9 That's why you're here, not to compare yourself to others, but so that you might receive the forgiveness of sins. It's what your Lord knows you need, and it's what He here offers freely. Rejoice, tax collector, extortioners, unjust, adulterers. Rejoice,

sinner, formerly dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to walk.

Rejoice, you who were once children of wrath. Here you have become children of God, heirs of forgiveness and mercy. Rejoice, all you who know and lament your sins, here is the forgiveness you need.

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

Soli Deo Gloria
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