

August 11, 2024
Text: Luke 18:9-14

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Why did God accept Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's? As we pastors were discussing this Sunday's readings, one joked that it's clearly a sign that God is not a vegetarian, as He has no regard for Cain's salad.

Joking aside, it is a question worth asking. And it's a question that the Scriptures answer. In Hebrews chapter 11, the Holy Spirit reveals that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable because it was made in faith. After speaking of Abel specifically, the inspired writer of Hebrews says, "But without faith it is impossible to please [God]."

It is God-given faith which justifies – saves – and this is also seen in the parable that Jesus tells in our Gospel reading. Looking at the Pharisee and the tax collector, we see the same thing. The tax collector, and not the Pharisee, went down to his house justified, declared righteous by God, because he had faith.

Faith is the key here. And that must be understood when we look at the Pharisee. When we look at his prayer, there are good things there: good works. He says, "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

By themselves, these are outwardly good works. Fasting is commended to God's people in both the Old and New Testaments, even by Jesus Himself. And while the command to specifically tithe is only found in the Old Testament ceremonial law, giving to support the spread of the Gospel is still required of God's people in the New.

This Pharisee, then, has not only met these requirements, but he's gone above and beyond. The law required a Jew to fast once a week; he fasts twice. It required a tenth of one's income to be given; he gives ten percent both of his income and then also ten percent of whatever he buys with his income. If works could earn God's favor, if being a good person could get you to heaven, this guy would be there. But Jesus says no. The Pharisee does not go down to his house justified.

Why is that? Because this Pharisee's faith is not in God; it's in himself. Just look at the rest of his prayer. Where's his focus? "I thank you... I am not like other men... I fast... I give tithes..." It's all about him and how great he is!

You can clearly see why St. Luke prefaces this parable as he does: "And He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." The Pharisee offers thanks, but it's empty thanks. His true praise is directed at himself, not at God. He's done all these good things and trusts that surely God will reward such an obviously good and righteous person as he.

It's not only God whom this Pharisee hopes will notice. He's clearly grandstanding, hoping that the other people in the temple will notice him. He's standing by himself, but not in the way that the tax collector is far off.

No, this is him taking the stage, being somewhere where he clearly won't get mixed up with or lumped in with others. He's special, he's better, and he wants everyone to know.

As Jesus says elsewhere about those who trust in themselves, “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.” This Pharisee wants the people to look up to him, to want to be like him, to idolize him.

This is wrong, not just because it’s obviously prideful and arrogant, but because this Pharisee is taking something commended to us by the Scriptures and warping it, like with his fasting and tithing. The Bible does say that we are to set good examples for others, and to follow those Christians who show forth God’s righteousness. Think of the words of St. Paul to the Christians in Corinth, where he says, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” The apostle holds up his example as one that the Corinthians should seek to follow.

What’s the difference between him and the Pharisee from the parable? Notice that Paul isn’t the endpoint. Christians should seek to imitate him, not because he’s righteous in himself, but because he imitates Christ. Christ is the ultimate example, the Good Shepherd whom all sheep should follow.

This Pharisee, on the other hand, thinks that he is the best, the one that all those in the temple should aspire to be like. He’s so much better than the rest, all those sinners, those extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even that tax collector.

And here again, as he’s naming sinners, his example comes close to Scripture but then misses it by a mile. Consider these other words that St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Sounds like Paul is doing the same thing as the Pharisee. Is Paul’s former life as a Pharisee coming out here? No! The key difference is what follows as Paul continues: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

Paul doesn’t direct the Corinthians to thank God that they aren’t like those other men, as the Pharisee did. No, he reminds them that many of them were mired in the very same sins. And then he reminds them that Jesus has washed them from those sins in Holy Baptism, that Jesus has sanctified them – set them apart as His – by giving them His Spirit, that Jesus has justified them, paying for all their debts with His holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death. They aren’t to trust in themselves, but rather in God and His mercy in Jesus.

That is what the tax collector does. Like the Pharisee, he too enters the temple. But he doesn’t find a place of prominence to stand where everyone can see him. No, he stands far off, trying not to be seen by anyone by God. If, or when, since the Pharisee points him out, others see him, most will certainly revile him.

Tax collectors were hated, not only because they worked for the hated Roman government, but also because they very often made great wealth by ripping off those paying taxes. And if someone objected to the tax bill given by the collector, his appeal was to the soldiers guarding the tax collector,

and as we hear from John the Baptist, those soldiers might just shake you down some more for your troubles.

So when it would come to outward works, it would seem that the Pharisee was better than the tax collector. And the tax collector would agree. He, too, had come to the temple to speak to God about his works.

But instead of bragging about them, the tax collector is there to repent of them. He doesn't try to make excuses for them. He doesn't blame God, saying that, if God didn't want him to do this, God should provide a different, equally well-paying job for him. No, he simply comes before God and, as we read, "would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'"

He confesses, not from forced words, but from a heart filled with sorrow over his sins. And note also, he doesn't say that he's basically a good guy who's made some poor choices. He doesn't hold up some of his redeeming qualities to try to get a lighter sentence from the divine Judge. No, he declares that he is a sinner. And in what alone is his hope? The mercy of God!

There, in the tax collector's plea, we see faith. The tax collector declares that he is a sinner, worthy of punishment. But he also declares his trust, his faith, that God is who He has revealed Himself to be in His Word. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, the Lord reveals Himself to be the God who is "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

The Lord has declared that He is the Merciful One, and the tax collector is begging God to be the Merciful One to him. The Lord states that He is the One who forgives sins, and the tax collector comes to Him for that very thing. The tax collector doesn't say that he deserves this at all, and that's only right, as mercy is by definition undeserved.

No, he's trusting that God is who He says He is, and asking Him to be that God for him. He is putting forth nothing of his own worthiness or goodness, but instead is looking completely to God in faith. That's why he went down to his house justified, declared forgiven and righteous, purely out of the mercy and grace of God.

Such faith is the only thing that justifies us as well. It's easy for us to say, "Of course we're saved by faith in Jesus! That's Christianity 101!" The thing is, though, we're constantly tempted to put our trust in ourselves and not in God. Satan's been using that temptation since the Garden of Eden, telling Adam and Eve that they could be like God, not having to rely on God.

Now, the devil rarely gets Christians to go from faith in Jesus to totally trusting in themselves overnight. Instead, he prefers to work in small bites, just little things.

As one example, Satan gets us to think that, when we do something good for others, that good work cancels out or makes up for something bad we've done. This is sort of the idea of karma, popularized from Eastern religions.

Like the Pharisee, this is taking something close to what Scripture says but then missing it by a mile. Yes, we should do good to others, and yes, we should seek to repair hurts as we are able. The Scriptures command this.

But do such good deeds cancel out or offset the bad? No! Only the blood of Jesus can make atonement for sin. Truly good works flow from faith in Jesus as Christians seek to imitate Him. If we start thinking that good deeds cancel out bad, just by virtue of the deed itself, then you know what you don't need anymore? The cross! The atoning sacrifice of Jesus! "Just make sure that you've done more good than bad in your life and you'll go to heaven when you die."

Perhaps few people would say it that directly, but many people out there think that, as long as you're a "good person," you'll get to heaven. Satan has deceived many who bear the name Christian, even whole church bodies, into believing that good can come from many different sources and so Jesus is then just one of many ways to eternal life. "Just be kind and loving like Jesus, and even if you don't believe the words of Jesus, you'll be saved in the end."

However, this is contrary to God's own Word. When people think that their own efforts make them good and righteous, they are following the path of the Pharisee. And that path does not lead to life. Only eternal death.

The path that leads to life is that of the tax collector, to throw oneself totally at the mercy of Jesus and trust in Him. As with this tax collector, we must not make excuses or try to justify our sins. We cannot claim, "Well, that's just the way the world is," because the Word declares to us, "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

We can't hold that people are mostly good at heart and just make a bad choice now and then, for as we heard in our Epistle, we were dead in our trespasses and sins, walking according to the powers of this world. We must confess that, with the tax collector, we are sinners.

And when we do that, our merciful Lord will remind us in His Word that He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. His Word tells us that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When we call out to Christ that we are lost, He in mercy tells us that "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Though we were dead in trespasses, God who is rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ, not because we deserve it, but because of His great love for us.

Our Lord is the Lord who is merciful, and He delights in showing mercy to sinners. That's why He took on flesh and came to this earth. His cross took the place of the mercy seat from the Ark of the Covenant, sprinkled with blood not from goats and bulls but from His stripes and wounds.

He was raised up from this earth, not just for the Jews, but to draw all nations to Himself. Our sins are paid for, not year after year by a sinful high priest who must atone for his own sins as well, but by the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God, who is at the same time the perfect High Priest who intercedes for us sinners at His Father's right hand.

When we cry out to God to be merciful to us sinners, He points us to the blood of His Son, which has already been poured out for us.

No matter how far off our sins would place us from God's righteousness, in mercy He still comes to us, for as the Scripture says, "He came and preached peace to you who were afar off." You can't fast, tithe, or earn your way into heaven, but in mercy the Lord has already given His life to bring you there. God will never be impressed with your boasts, nor will He let you into heaven because you've done more good works than someone else. He will, though, rejoice to see you clothed in the righteousness of His Son, and He is pleased by good works done in humble faith.

Concluding the parable, Jesus says, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Follow in the footsteps of Him who humbled Himself even unto death upon the cross, and know that, as He was exalted, so too shall you be.

In the name of Jesus, amen.