

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 18:9-14: "Are You the Lord's Student or His Teacher?"
August 27, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour down upon us the abundance of Your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for Trinity 11, ELH p. 161)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus] 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." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who opposes the proud and promotes the humble, dear fellow redeemed:

It's the first day of school. You are excited, but mostly nervous. You are especially nervous about science class. Science just isn't your subject. You get your books together and find your seat in the back of the classroom. But something is missing: the teacher isn't there! Minutes pass as the chatter among the students gets louder and louder. Then the principal walks into the room. "Sorry for the delay," he says, "your teacher was not able to make it. We have decided to elect one of you to lead the class today." And then he looks right at you! How would you feel about that? Probably only the class clown would be excited about that opportunity, and not much teaching or learning would take place.

As a student, your job is not to teach, but to learn. Your teacher might call on you to answer a question and share with the class what you know. But nothing annoys classmates (and a teacher) as much as the student who acts like she knows everything. Not only does she raise her hand to answer every question, but she also takes it upon herself to correct the teacher! Her know-it-all behavior exposes how much she does not understand. The proverb comes to mind: "Better to keep your mouth closed and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!"

I

But we so often see this arrogant behavior in our culture. When the latest popular social movement sweeps across the country, the unbelieving world takes it upon itself to lecture those who follow God's Word, the Bible. The world expects the church to march along with it in lock-step. It is shocked when this does not happen. "You think marriage is only between a man and a woman!?" "You think a person's gender is defined by their body parts!?" Then comes the lecture. There is no respect for ancient writings that speak clearly about moral issues and have been read and confessed for thousands of years. There is no respect for conscience or a difference of opinion. They say, "If you do not agree with us, then you are full of hatred, and you shouldn't have the right to speak!"

What does it say about the state of learning in our country, when there is a refusal even to engage someone in a discussion who has a different viewpoint? Christians are often warned that if they do not change their beliefs, they will find themselves "on the wrong side of history." But who is the infallible authority in this world that is able to say what the "right side" is? There is no unchanging standard in the world. History shows that what is considered right and good in one era is condemned as evil in another. But God has provided an unchanging standard of righteousness. He has given the moral law. It is a law to govern not just believers, but all people. That is why He has printed His law on every human heart. He wants every individual and state and country to abide by this law.

But just like it was with Satan, and then with Adam and Eve, and all their descendants, we think we can teach and do righteousness better than God can. The Pharisees are prime examples of this. Jesus referred to one who stood up in the temple to pray. He said, "*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.*" He wanted it known that he even went above and beyond what God commanded. What a good person! What an upstanding citizen! But God was not impressed. What He saw in the Pharisee's heart was only self-righteousness and pride - not faith (1Sam. 16:7).

And the Pharisee's prayer was not really a prayer at all. It was a message to God that He better take notice. A holy man had entered the building! Get the heavenly reward ready! But the Lord listens to no sinner who would presume to teach Him. What does God have to learn from sinners? It is not just unbelievers who think this way. Christians do too. We might read something in the Bible that is just too sharp for our tastes. We wish God would tone that teaching down a bit, since it simply doesn't fit our time. Or maybe something goes badly in our lives and instead of trusting God's merciful plan for us, we blame Him and criticize His inaction. We think that if God did what we wanted, our lives—and the world—would be a better place.

Suppose that happened. Suppose the Lord stepped aside for a day and gave you all of His power AND all of His responsibility. Now you're in charge. What would you do first? Before you could even think, you would have a million prayers hitting your ear at the same time. You would have the concern of keeping the planets and stars in their orbits. You would feel the pressure of providing for countless humans and animals through plants and crops that require just the right amount of sun and rain. You would have the angels to command, who would

constantly be looking to you for orders. Do you think you could manage? And yet you and I are going to tell God where He has failed and what He should be doing differently!?

II

We have nothing to teach God, and we have everything to learn from Him. The proper attitude to have toward God is exemplified by a tax collector, of all people. The tax collectors in Jesus' day were viewed as sell-outs. They contracted with the oppressive Romans to level taxes against the Jews. Besides that, they had the reputation of charging more than required. They were not on anyone's list of righteous people. But that does not mean they were beyond the Lord's saving grace. Remember that the apostle Matthew was once a tax collector, whom Jesus called away from his station (Mt. 9:9). And Jesus also visited and ate with many tax collectors and other undesirable characters, saying that *"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners"* (v. 13).

The patient, tender call of the Lord reached the tax collector in Jesus' parable. He made his way to the temple and stood in a corner praying. He felt like any of us would who had fallen into sin and neglected the means of grace. Even though the divine service where God dispenses His gifts of forgiveness and healing is exactly what we need, the church doors can feel like the hardest thing to walk through. We anticipate judgment instead of love. We picture the people there looking down on us. But even if those things happened (and I don't expect they would), it still would not change what God wants to do for you through His Word and Sacraments. He wants you to repent of your sins and hear the Gospel message of full and free forgiveness.

This is why the tax collector came to the temple. He came because he wanted to be right with God. He knew his wicked deeds and his wicked heart. The Pharisee was right—he was no righteous man. But the tax collector was sorry for his sins. He bowed his head, beat his breast, and said, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* His money could not buy forgiveness. Good behavior could not ease his guilty conscience. Only God could help him. Only God could *save* him. And that is just what the Lord did. Jesus said, *"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified."*

He went home "justified," or counted as righteous before God. But why? Our gracious Lord does not turn away the penitent. In fact, He is the One who works that repentance. He is the One who drives the heart to despair of its own righteousness, and to trust in Him alone for salvation. That is what He must do to turn arrogant teachers, which we are by nature, into His humble students.

Once He has us in the right place, sitting at His feet and listening to what He says, then He continuously imparts to us a knowledge, an understanding, a wisdom that we could never obtain even if we sat before the great teachers of the world for 1000 years. Paul writes, *"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him' – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit"* (1Cor. 2:9-10). The Holy Spirit reveals to us that in His love, God the Father sent His only Son to humble Himself and shoulder our sin, so that we might be covered in His righteousness and exalted.

Even though you, like the Pharisee, have often looked down on others in your pride and thought that you were someone impressive, your Father forgives your sins. He counts you among the justified through faith in His Son. It is Jesus who lived the humble life of obedience that God's law requires. He deserved nothing but glory, but in all humility, He set it aside out

of love for you. He said to His disciples, *"I am among you as the one who serves"* (Lk. 22:27). Even on the cross, His prayer was, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (23:34).

The Lord forgives you just as He did the tax collector. But your training is not complete. You have more learning to do. Humble students must continuously acknowledge their weaknesses and inabilities. As the apostle Peter wrote, *"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you"* (1Pe. 5:5-6).

The unbelieving world, the devil, and your own flesh are going to attack you and your God-given beliefs. They are going to point their finger at you like the self-righteous Pharisee and consign you to the company of the wicked. But the Lord is merciful. He gives grace to the humble. He will not ignore the one who cries to Him for help. He sends you on your way justified. And He promises at the proper time to exalt you and give you a share in His glory.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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