

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Luke 18:9-14: “God Is Merciful to You.”
August 28, 2022 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty God, You resist the proud and give grace to the humble: Deliver us when we draw near to You from all self-sufficiency and spiritual pride; and grant us an ever deepening sense of our own unworthiness and of Your unfailing mercy; through Him who is our only righteousness, Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 117)

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

The sermon text for today 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. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who frees us from the fading glory of this world and delivers us a glory that shall never pass away, dear fellow redeemed:

Of all the ways we could describe our favorite celebrities, whether athletes, actors, singers, politicians, or CEOs, I’m not sure the word “humble” comes to mind. Our culture teaches us to glory in our successes and pass the blame for our failures. Brash and arrogant talk gets a person noticed, while fair and kind statements are ignored. But the things that impress the world are not the things that impress our Lord.

Jesus says, “*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*” As an example of someone who exalts himself, Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee. Now the Pharisees were some of the most virtuous and moral people of their day. They diligently followed God’s Commandments and the traditions of their fathers. They had a good reputation among the people. They stayed clear of any public scandals. This is not what Jesus was criticizing here.

Like the Pharisee, all of us should keep from swindling people out of their goods. All of us should be fair and give what we owe. All of us should honor marriage by our example and by the guidance we give others. And it would be beneficial for us to consider ancient practices like

regular fasting to restrain our sinful desires, or the practice of tithing—giving a tenth of our income—to train ourselves not to become too attached to the things of this world.

The problem was not in how the Pharisee was living, but in how he was exalting himself. He started out by saying, *“God, I thank You,”* but it is obvious that he was praising himself and looking for praise from others. *“I am not like other men,”* he boasted, *“I am a good man. Look at all the good things I am doing!”* In the Pharisee’s mind, he didn’t really need anything from God. He thought God needed something from him, and he was happy to provide it.

This is an easy trap to fall into. We know how God wants us to live; we have His Ten Commandments. So we can’t help but think that if we do a better job of keeping the Commandments than others do, that God must be happier with us. But that is supposing we have actually kept some of the Commandments.

Your opinion about this will depend on how you understand the word “keep.” If “keep” means that you have not always chosen the sinful path, and that you have sometimes helped your neighbors, then you have “kept” the Commandments from time to time. But is that how Jesus teaches it? He says, *“For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.... You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mat. 5:18, 48).

Jesus says that if you have not perfectly kept the Commandments—in your thoughts, words, and actions—, then you have not kept them at all. That’s why Jesus condemns the Pharisee in His parable. The Pharisee may have lived an outwardly “good” life, but he had no love in his heart toward his neighbors, and he had no faith in his heart toward God. St. Paul writes that *“all who rely on works of the law are under a curse,”* because they have not been perfect. He quotes a passage from Deuteronomy: *“Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them”* (Gal. 3:10).

That’s a different kind of standard than the pharisaical one of comparing ourselves with others. Comparing our righteousness with the righteousness of others is like rolling around in the same mud pit and then trying to determine who is less dirty. There is no room for pride in God’s equation of salvation. *“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:22-23).

Those who listened to Jesus were shocked that He was comparing a Pharisee and a tax collector. They saw them in completely different categories. The people respected the Pharisees, and they despised the tax collectors who were notorious for upping the taxes that were required for their own gain. But God puts everyone in the same category: *“all have sinned.”* Jesus did not approve of the greed of tax collectors any more than He approved of the pride of Pharisees. The difference was that the tax collector recognized his sin while the Pharisee did not.

Imagine what it took the tax collector to even walk into the temple courts. He was there because he knew he had done wrong. He knew he needed forgiveness. And if his sin wasn’t burdensome enough, he could just imagine the dirty looks he would receive, people questioning what he was even doing there. The reason he might have stayed away from the

temple is the reason many don't venture to church. They know they should go, but they imagine it will only cause them more shame.

By the grace of God, the tax collector came in to God's holy house. He found a quiet spot, bowed his head, and prayed. Prayer is essential for the Christian. Our Lord commands it, and that means the devil opposes it. Whatever God wants for us, the devil tries to counter it. God wants us to confess our sins, so the devil tells us to embrace them. God wants us to trust in Him with all our heart, so the devil urges us to trust ourselves, others, plain old luck—anything but God.

So while the tax collector was praying for forgiveness, the devil was there telling him he hasn't been so bad. Everything he has done is legal. He deserves to have a little for himself for how hard he works and all that he has to put up with. He doesn't need the church. If his conscience is bothering him, maybe he could just do a good deed for someone sometime. Why should he waste time in the temple with those intolerable Pharisees? What a bunch of hypocrites they are anyway!

You know the devil's voice; he has been in your ear too. "You work hard; you deserve to let loose every now and then!" "You give so much—no one appreciates you like they should." "Everyone breaks the rules sometime. Stop being such a worrier and have some fun!" "Your parents might not like this, your pastor might not approve, but it's your life, not theirs!" "Why should everyone else have it good, and you get nothing?"

When the devil tempts us like this, the best response is what Jesus told him, *"Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'"* (Mat. 4:10). We worship and serve the Lord, because He loves us. He is not the kind of master who is looking to get something from us. He is the Master who shares all His riches with His undeserving servants.

That is why God the Son came in our flesh. He came to serve us and give Himself for us. Even though Jesus was entirely perfect, He did not go around like the Pharisee boasting about His goodness all the time. He humbly spent Himself for the good of others, for their healing, their help, their salvation. Everything we have failed at, all the damage we have done, Jesus came to set it right.

Unlike the Pharisees, He loved His neighbors in perfect humility. Unlike the tax collectors, He gave with perfect generosity and selflessness. He perfectly kept God's Commandments for you too. However you have done wrong in your vocations, your different stations in life, Jesus did right. This is why there is no need for you to compare yourself with others or to think that God must be pleased with you because of how hard you have tried. God is pleased with you, because Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience for you. By faith in Jesus, you are perfect in God's sight just as He requires you to be.

And all of your wrongs—your pride and arrogance, your unloving attitude, your taking advantage of others, your weakness in the faith—all of these transgressions are washed away in the blood of Jesus. Just after St. Paul writes that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"* he continues by saying that all *"are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in*

Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood—a sufficient payment, an atoning sacrifice—, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:24-25).

This promise of God that you are justified because of what Jesus has done is the reason you can pray to Him for mercy with total confidence. His mercy toward you does not depend on your own goodness or your own efforts. His mercy depends on His promise, which comes from His own unchanging and unchangeable will toward you and all mankind.

In His mercy, He does not judge you for the many ways you have failed. He does not point an accusing finger at you like that Pharisee. He does not despise your humble heart of repentance or your anguished prayer spoken with trembling lips. He forgives your sins, grants you a clear conscience, and sends you to your home restored and strengthened—back to your stations in life to humbly serve and love your neighbors.

This humble service may go unnoticed or unappreciated in the world. You might not be recognized, praised, and looked up to as others are. But you are right with God. You are justified—declared innocent and holy—because Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death to save your soul and then rose from the dead to secure your victory over the grave.

The things that are worth having, you have them by faith in Jesus. And the glory that He now enjoys exalted at the right hand of His Father will be yours too. You haven’t earned it. You don’t deserve it. And all of it is yours, because **God Is Merciful to You.**

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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