

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

What if I told you that Jesus' conclusion to the parable in today's Gospel, "...everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted," does not necessarily refer to the Pharisee and the tax collector, respectively? Well, not ultimately, anyway. Bear that in mind as we continue through this sermon.

Now, the normal conclusion that we often draw to that statement does work. Jesus says it in connection with the parable for that reason. The last verse of the pericope is a complete sentence, the conclusion mentioned merely being the second half of that sentence. Jesus also says, "I tell you, [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the [Pharisee]." Since Jesus concludes with the whole bit about everyone exalting themselves being humbled and the one humbling himself being exalted, it's easy (and not altogether incorrect) to hear him speaking of the Pharisee (or Pharisees) exalting themselves and being humbled while the insignificant tax collector being the one who humbled himself and being exalted as he goes away forgiven.

After all, we recognize the puffing out of the chest of the Pharisee in the parable as being self-exaltation. And, as other Pharisees and scribes were also listening to Jesus tell this parable—he tells it to those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous"—you may well imagine that as Jesus lists the Pharisee's accomplishments, they were nodding along in agreement. The man in the parable was not like the unrighteous; neither were they. The man in the parable fasted twice a week; so did they—sometimes more often, even! The man in the parable tithed from all that he had; so did they. At that point in the parable, the scribes and Pharisees were feeling pretty good about themselves.

I bet even Jesus' disciples thought that the Pharisee in the parable was a righteous man. I wonder if as they listened to Jesus, they compared themselves to the Pharisee and imagined that they came up well short. The man in the parable was not like the unrighteous, but they were; dirty fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, who knows what else—not the most respected people in society. The man in the parable fasted twice a week, but they ate almost every day, while fasting happened only at the required times, if at all. The man in the parable tithed from all that he had, but they didn't have much and certainly didn't give any as a tithe. At that point in the parable, the disciples probably felt pretty low, maybe even looking for some peg of righteousness on which they could hang their hat—something about which they could feel good about themselves, too. Hey, they follow a Rabbi around wherever He goes; that ought to count for something, right?

But then, Jesus pulls the rug out from under that kind of thinking. In the parable, the tax collector in the back beats his chest, hangs his head low, and says only one thing: "God, be merciful to me a sinner." He asks for mercy, and in doing so, asks to be covered in the blood of a propitious sacrifice. The word he uses for mercy is the same one used in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—for the cover of the ark of the covenant. Upon this cover would the sacrificial blood of the sin offering be sprinkled in order to make atonement for the sins of the people. (cf. Leviticus 16:11-15, 30) So, the tax collector was asking for propitiation, that he would receive remission of his sins by the blood of a Sacrifice—one particular Sacrifice, this is Jesus telling the parable, remember—because "without the shedding of blood there is no remission." (Hebrews 9:22b)

The tax collector knew of his condition before God. He knew that there was no reason to puff out his chest, but to beat it back. He knew that there was no reason to hold his head high, but that in grief and terror for his life, he could do nothing else but hang it low. He knew that there was no righteousness in him, but that he needed something from outside of himself to make amends for his sins. Because of this, he is humble before God and confesses his sin. And let's be perfectly clear: this humility and confession, the chest beating and head hanging, did not come from himself, but was given

to him by God, much as Peter's confession did not come from flesh and blood but was given to him by God. (cf. Matthew 16:16-17)

"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other." There goes the rug. The tax collector is justified and not the Pharisee. The scribes, Pharisees, and disciples listening to Jesus likely dropped their mouths wide open in disbelief. The scribes and Pharisees were feeling pretty good about themselves as they compared themselves to the Pharisee in the parable, perhaps even thought themselves better than him for going beyond his good works. But the Pharisee goes down to his house unjustified. What about them? The disciples knew they didn't compare to the Pharisee in the parable, but could have thought themselves worthy of justification for their good works, but if the Pharisee isn't justified for his, then they certainly could not be for theirs. The tax collector, confessing his sins, goes home justified, not the man like them.

"...[E]veryone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The Pharisee in the parable, the people Jesus was telling the parable to, and Jesus' own disciples were all humbled in what Jesus had just said, having exalted themselves by being, identifying with, and comparing themselves to the Pharisee in the parable.

What about you, dear hearers? Well, deep down inside, there's a part of you that does the same thing as the Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus told this parable. There's a part of you that does the same thing as the disciples who heard it, too. It may not look or sound like the Pharisee in the parable, but the result is the same. That part of you is known as the Old Man. He looks for every way possible to puff you up, hold your head high, feel good about yourself, exalt yourself, make you look and feel better than the next guy who is struggling with the same Old Man doing the same thing to him.

So, you begin thinking to yourself thoughts similar to what the Pharisee expressed in the parable. "I go to church every week." "I go to every theology class offered at church." "I study the Bible every night." "I'm the biggest giver at church." "I do the most work at church." "I play the piano better than anyone else at church." What are you really saying? "Look at me, God, I'm not like the others around here. Thank you for making me better than them."

Even if you're only thinking it—even if it's a mere blip of a thought in the back of your mind—this is your struggle with your Old Man. It is the sin of self-exaltation and hubris—thinking highly of yourself, more highly than you ought. It turns the grace that you have been given into a law. All of those things mentioned earlier are fine qualities—coming to the Divine Service every week, going to every class that is offered here, studying the Scriptures every night, being able to give much, being able to work much around here, having a talent for playing the piano, etc.—but to think of them in comparison to another, that you do it better or more than another, is to seek from it some measure of righteousness. "Look at me God, I am better than the rest of them, I am more righteous than them; therefore, I certainly deserve to be justified more than they do."

Anytime you seek to justify yourself by your keeping of the law—even if by your keeping of the law better than another—then you have estranged yourself from Christ. St. Paul wrote, "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Galatians 5:4) Therefore, as Jesus said, you will go down to your house not justified. This is the fate of humanity, because all are infected with this thing called sin, and the whole world is always looking for a way to demonstrate its superiority over another, and, whether they say it or not, do so to indicate their closeness to God relative to another.

Dear baptized, as I said earlier, Jesus' conclusion to the parable does not merely refer to the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable. The clue lies in the nouns that He uses: "...[E]veryone who exalts himself will be humbled, and **he** who humbles himself will be exalted." To exalt oneself would mean to lift oneself up to a position higher than where they belong. To humble oneself means

to lower oneself to a position lower than where they belong. You and all creation seek only to exalt yourselves. There is only One who can and has humbled Himself:

[Christ Jesus,] who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.  
(Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus Christ, who is God from eternity, through whom all things were created, is deserving of all glory, honor, and praise, by the very nature of His being God. But, that did not stop Him from humbling Himself, taking on your flesh and blood, and dying with it. He was lifted up, exalted, on a throne which was two beams crossed together, planted on a hill outside of Jerusalem. There, He shed His blood and gave His life as a ransom for many. (cf. Matthew 20:28) Placed in a grave, the lowest place of the low, He was raised again to life, and ascended into heaven 40 days after that. "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11) Jesus humbled Himself and was exalted.

More than that, Jesus humbled Himself for you. You who seek only to exalt yourself, were assumed in His flesh and blood, and by way of your baptism into His death and resurrection, you died with Him. You were swallowed up in Jesus' death and resurrection, and in His ascension, you were exalted with Him. This is the grace of God for you, dear Baptized, that Jesus humbled Himself for you, taking your hubris and self-exaltation into His flesh and destroying it in His death and burial. They are removed from you and made His, for He was made sin for you!

But it doesn't end there, dear Baptized. By His work on your behalf, you are now given confession. You see, that Old Man that you struggle with is something that by daily contrition and repentance is drowned with all sins and evil desires, a humbling unlike any other. By His grace, you look back at your life, what you have done and continue to do, and you cry out like the tax collector, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." You drown Old Adam again and again. You ask for the same thing that the tax collector asked for, that you would be covered by the blood of the Sacrifice, that Jesus' humbling and death remove from you again the sins that you have committed. This is your confession by grace, given to you from above, not coming to you from yourself.

That's when you are pointed to the exaltation of your Savior. You are reminded of the crucifixion of Jesus, where He shed His blood as your propitiation. You are directed to your God on the throne where He gave His life as your ransom. These are all delivered to you in Baptism, where you were washed in water and the Word, made your robes white in the blood of the Lamb, where for the first time in your life, a New Man emerged to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. Forever...that means that the from the daily contrition and repentance, where your Old Man drowns again and again, the New Man emerges again and again. You are justified by grace, exalted with your Savior, Jesus Christ.

In other words, from this place, where Jesus is most certainly present for you, to forgive you, give you life and salvation, having been humbled, you are exalted again and again, going home justified, because you *are* forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.