

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity  
St. Luke 18:9-14

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

As was usually the case, you might imagine that the Pharisees left Jesus dejected after He had told them the parable that is today's text, if not angry and ready to stone Him. It's a simple parable, yet if they did walk away dejected, one that they got so wrong. Nevertheless, be it simple, it's one that you can easily get wrong, too.

In the parable, a Pharisee goes up to the temple to pray. He puffs himself up and shoots off a long list of his righteous accomplishments, thanking God that he is better than other people. Now, it's one thing to take a little pride in what you have done; it's perfectly fine to feel good about the good works you have done—it's another thing completely to boast in them, and thank God that you are better than other people.

Jesus was telling this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. From the parable, it's plain to see that the "some who trusted in themselves" are Pharisees. The Pharisee in the parable certainly trusted in himself; his prayer is all about himself and what he had done: "I'm not like other men...I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

One of those "other men"—a tax collector—also went up to the temple to pray. Of course he was to be despised. A Jew working for the Roman occupiers, and taking a little bit of others' income only to pass it off as part of the Roman tax. Tax collectors were thieves, gaining another man's possessions and income in a way that only seemed right. You might imagine that deep down, these tax collectors—some of them, at least—knew that what they were doing was wrong. Maybe the one in the parable did: "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, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The **other man** went home justified, not the self-righteous, self-justified, indignant Pharisee. And it is likely that the Pharisees listening to Jesus tell the parable went home just as unjustified as the Pharisee in the parable and dejected, because they knew He was accusing them.

Now, how is it that you can get this parable wrong? You identify with the tax collector because you count yourself among the justified. You go at it backwards, but only stop at the justification. But, that leads you down a road similar to that of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. "God, I thank you that I am not like the Pharisees, those self-righteous, self-justified men who do not trust you. I trust in you; I receive forgiveness from the pastor as if from you every week."

How Pharisaical of you! In whom do you trust if you pray like that, if you think like that—no, *when* you think like that? No one other than yourself! Your prayer or thought certainly starts with a noble platitude: "God, I thank you..." but it falls off the cliff after that. Just like the Pharisee in the parable, this prayer is all about you, with a little God thrown in for "good measure."

But that's not the only way. You may also suppose that the other man, the tax collector, goes home justified because of the specific work that he did. In this faulty thinking, you understand the tax collector to be justified because he asked for mercy. And that's why you are here week after week, to recite the words, "I a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities...be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being." I mean, that's the good work that you can do to be rewarded with forgiveness and justification, right? Such thinking makes the confession all about you.

Well, why shouldn't the emphasis be on you. That's what the Old Man wants. It has to be about you; otherwise, you wouldn't be here. Alright, then, if you want it to be about you, then hear this:

you're a sinner. You are dead in your trespasses and sins. You would be lost and condemned forever if it were all up to you.

There you are, then, confronted with it. Your sin is laid before you. How do you respond? Do you want to get up and leave here dejected? Are you ready to pick up stones to toss at me? The doors are right there, and there are plenty of stones right outside. Again, how Pharisaical of you!

There is another option, though. For that, I point you to your brother Cain from the Old Testament reading. Here is the world's first murderer, and you, not unlike him, follow in his steps in that regard with your name-calling and injurious desires. YHWH confronts Cain with his sin and pronounces the sentence:

The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth. (Genesis 4:10-12)

And how does Cain respond? He doesn't just walk away. Perhaps he cries out in distress, looking for a little preservation, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" (Genesis 4:13) Perhaps his cry is a little different—the Hebrew there is vague, and what Cain said can also be translated, "My sin is too great to be forgiven." That could be understood as a cry for mercy, and it looks like God obliges, blessing him with a mark that would spare his life from the wrath of anyone who might come across him.

I want to point you to a word that the tax collector uses: sinner. He knew that part about himself and knew that it separates him from God. He knew that his sin is greater than he could bear. So, in humility, the tax collector beats his chest and asks for mercy. He deserves to die, so only an act of mercy—being relieved of the punishment he deserves—could justify him.

The tax collector is confronted with his sin on a daily basis—his very livelihood is predicated on thievery. Cain was confronted with his sin—even being the world's first murderer was greater than he knew could be forgiven. Their sins before them, they were both brought low and humbled—killed, as it were, by the very law of God.

The law of God kills you, too. It accuses you. It lays your sins before you. How do you respond? There are only three options, and of those three, only one is God-given: rejection and rebellion, despair, or contrition.

- The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. (Psalm 34:18)
- The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)
- For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones." (Isaiah 57:15)

The tax collector went down to his house justified. Humbled under the weight of his sin, in God-given contrition he asked for mercy. To put it bluntly, he didn't get in the way of his own justification; his plea for mercy was not merely a good work—it was not "all about himself"—it was given to him by God and was centered on his Savior.

Neither is the one you recite at the beginning of this service all about you. In fact, your plea for mercy, like that of the tax collector, is all about Jesus. The tax collector asked for mercy, and the word that he used is the same one used in the ancient, Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, for the cover to the Ark of the Covenant. It is upon this cover that the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled, and by it, the sins of the people were atoned for. The death of one covers the life of another, and the other goes down to their home justified. The tax collector, pleading for mercy, is

doing so for the sake of a propitiatory sacrifice in order that God would be appeased on account of his sin.

Now, when you speak the confession and plead for God to be merciful and gracious unto you, your plea is all about Jesus. Unlike the tax collector, though, you come right out and say it: "...for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ..." By your words, you are essentially sprinkling the cover of the Ark with the blood of Jesus Christ—you are certainly recalling the death of Jesus Christ on the cross under the full wrath of God in your place. There, Jesus shed His blood as your propitiation; that is, His blood covers your sins. Therefore, your confession—while you are at the heart of it—is all about Him, the Lamb of God, who is your propitiation.

Your sin is great, but your Savior is greater. He has conquered your sin by His death, and in doing so has been merciful to you. This is your salvation—the grace of God in His Son, Jesus Christ, received by faith and trust in Him solely.

This why Jesus told the parable that day. This is why God confronted Cain with His sin and punishment. Not that any would leave dejected and ready to kill again, but that they would seek mercy from Him who is merciful, who pardons iniquity and does not retain His anger forever, but delights in showing mercy. (cf. Micah 7:18) "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:4-7) God delights in showing you mercy, and He has in the person of His Son; now, you go down from here to your houses justified, because in Christ Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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