

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.

When Jesus began talking in St. Luke's 18th chapter, he told a parable "to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." You probably know the story. A widow had an adversary against whom she sought justice from a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. That's probably the absurd part of the parable, but for the sake of the Jesus is illustrating, it works. So, the widow goes to this judge time and again seeking justice. For his own sake, the judge eventually relents and grants the widow her case. Jesus' point is that God is much more just than this judge; He will give justice to His elect who cry out to Him day and night, and that speedily!

But then Jesus asked, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (cf. Luke 18:1-8)

That's when He moved into the parable you heard today. You see, the widow in the parable knew she couldn't rely on herself to get the justice that she needed. But there were others who were listening to Him speak who did trust in themselves, who thought themselves righteous, who despised others as beneath them. With the widow in mind, Jesus told them the parable.

Two men go up to the temple to pray. Dr. Arthur Just, in his commentary, helps to set the scene for those who, being so far removed from Jerusalem Temple practice, are likely unaware of what was going on there:

Public prayer was permitted in the temple in the morning and the evening during the atonement sacrifice, which was made at 9 a.m. and again at 3 p.m. Private prayer could occur at any time. It is possible that the two men came to the temple at one of the two times set aside for corporate prayer, during which time it was customary for people to offer their own private prayers, specifically at the offering of incense after the morning or evening atonement sacrifices. Thus, these two figures may have come to the temple, the locale of God's presence, precisely at the time of the atonement sacrifice, and atonement was the reason for the temple's existence. This context would point to the promise of the sacrifice of *the lamb*, who would take away the sins of the people *once and for all*.

That possibly being the case, the sacrifice was made, the burned incense offered, and the two men prayed. Neither man likely prayed silently, as doing so was highly uncommon; nevertheless, the implication in the parable was that the Pharisee prayed so as to be heard, while the tax collector was back in the corner praying and trying not to be heard.

The Pharisee prays a eucharistic prayer—a prayer of thanksgiving. There's nothing wrong with such a prayer, and I would hope that in those times when you want to thank God for one thing or another, you, too, would pray a eucharistic prayer. The problem with the Pharisee's prayer is that the focus is all on him, who he is and what he does, especially in comparison to other people. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. Here's how..."

It's an easy enough trap to fall into. It essentially all boils down to taking credit for the things that God has given you. It's not unlike the man in another parable that Jesus told, who tore down his small barns to build bigger ones to store the great bounty that he had reaped. (cf. Luke 12:16-21) But things don't have to be so grandiose. That is to say, at any moment when you start thanking God for what it is you have, what position you're in, whatever material blessing you have been given, Old Man wants you to take credit for it. You're the one who did the work for it. It was your brilliant idea that led

to some big gain and recognition. You're the one who lucked into winning something. "Thank you God that I'm not like those others who don't work as hard, think as well, win as much..."

The other thing about the Pharisee's prayer is that the other men that he thanked God that he was not like, he accuses of being the very things of which Pharisees are guilty—extortioners, unjust, and adulterers. But that seemed like no big deal for him, since he fasts twice a week and gives tithes of all that he gets. Nevertheless, the extortioners are greedy and rapacious and wicked, words that Jesus used to describe them back in Luke 11:39: "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness." As for unjust, remember that it is the Pharisees who wrongly see in themselves no need for a physician—for the Great Physician who is the only source of true righteousness. And while nowhere are the Pharisees described as adulterers, their lack of faith in the promise is described throughout the Old Testament as being akin to adultery.

This is entirely part of the psyche of fallen man. Old Adam is always on the lookout for others who share in your sin, but are worse off in it than you are. So, you, too, can thank God that you're not like those other men, because they are worse sinners than you are. And you'll have no problem pointing that out, too—not in any way that implicates you in this sin, but only in a way that calls attention to the depravity of the other man in his sin.

And that brings me to the tax collector. What I just said is exactly what the Pharisee did. He lumped the man in with those "other men:" extortioners, unjust, and adulterers. He was sure that the tax collector was these things, if not especially the first. Tax collectors in the days of Jesus were known for their rapaciousness, or greed, so it would make sense that the Pharisee would make it a point to point this out of him. As for unjust and adulterous, well, I don't have a comment on those with regard to the tax collector.

Maybe he did. Maybe he would have. Maybe he was those things. What he did do was show a piety unlike that of the Pharisee. He didn't draw attention to himself. He held his head down in shame. He beat his breast and pleaded for mercy: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" The word Jesus used there in His parable is not the usual word for mercy—a Greek word you might actually know: *eleison*—but one that the Septuagint used for the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. Another translation would be, "God, be propitiated to me, a sinner!"

Simply put, propitiation is made when demands are met so as to appease the one who makes those demands. As you hear it used throughout the Scripture, it means that satisfaction is made or paid for sins, and as the writer to the Hebrews put it, "[W]ithout the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." The shedding of blood propitiates God for the forgiveness of sins; and the blood demanded is that of the sinner, unless a substitute could be found. The blood that was shed in the Old Testament to make propitiation was that of bulls, goats, and lambs; once a year, this blood was sprinkled on the cover to the ark of the covenant, making propitiation for the sins of the people of Israel on Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement

Now, it's likely not Yom Kippur in the parable, but as Dr. Just pointed out, it was likely one of the times of the daily atonement sacrifices—perhaps a burnt offering or peace offering or sin offering, all of which pointed to the sacrifice of Yom Kippur, which itself pointed to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the cross.

This is what Jesus was pointing his listeners to with this parable. The Pharisee set himself apart from all men. He's better than them and made sure that God and everyone around him knew that, and this was especially true of the tax collector that he recognized in the temple with him. The Pharisee trusted in himself and what he did. He exalted Himself. He was right about the difference between himself and the tax collector; they are quite different from each other. The tax collector didn't trust in himself. What he knew of himself told him otherwise. The only way he could be right with God was if he was made that way from outside of himself—if he was propitiated to God. Jesus purposefully used

the word which could be translated “be propitiated” in place of mercy at a time when the daily atonement sacrifices were taking place. He makes the tax collector out to be one who reflects the faith that He wondered after the previous parable if He would see—it’s the faith of the remnant which humbles itself before the almighty hand of God, which yearned for the Messiah to come and make the final atoning sacrifice for His people.

“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.”

The Messiah has come and made that final atoning sacrifice, and that propitiation will finally be realized when the Messiah comes again on the Day of Judgment. The Messiah is Jesus, the Great High Priest who enters into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the sacrifice by which propitiation is made and atonement won. The Messiah is Jesus, the Lamb of God who sacrificed Himself and shed His blood in order to make propitiation and atonement.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:14-17)

That passage from Hebrews is the only other place in all of the New Testament where that same word used by that tax collector as a verb is also used as a verb. Jesus is the only One who could do all parts in propitiating the world to God, once for all. It is His blood used as payment, and He is the one who carried it to God as High Priest to offer it as your atonement.

This fact is declared to you at Holy Baptism, when you hear the words of Holy Absolution, and as you receive Christ’s very body and blood as bread and wine in Holy Communion. In each and every one of those times, the work of the Messiah is given to you, apprehended for you by faith—faith like the tax collector and the widow—and made your own. As Rev. Dr. Carl Fickenscher once said, “The Sacraments give us what the cross earned.”

Jesus is your Messiah. He is the one who laid down His life and shed His blood for you, and He took it up again. He is the one who pleads His own blood on your behalf, declaring you propitiated to the Father for His own sake. With the God-given faith that doesn’t lose heart but prays continually, which looks outside of yourself for justice and atonement, you are gathered here again and again to pray, “God, be propitiated to me, a sinner!” You are brought here in faith by the Spirit to recall, again and again, the atonement Sacrifice made once-for-all by Jesus Christ on the cross, to look forward to the day when that atonement is finally and fully realized on the Day of Judgment. So, in faith, you do not lose heart, but hope for that day, as you leave here justified again and again, 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.