

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR
The 22ND Sunday after Pentecost
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Luke 18:9-14

9 And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. 11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' 13 "But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' 14 "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, amen!

Do you exalt yourself or are you humble?

It might be harder to know than you think. For instance, if you asked the Pharisee in the parable, he probably would have said that he was very humble. After all, his prayer wasn't exactly boasting. He was praying and giving thanks to God. If you see someone praying and giving thanks to God, you probably will think they are a good person.

If you watched this Pharisee go about his life, you would probably see a person who really seemed righteous. He put a tenth of his income in the offering plate. He fasted twice a week. Not many people today do such things. He could also be seen regularly in God's house. Surely this was a good man.

So when the Pharisee thanked God declaring he was not like other men, he was giving credit to God, not to himself. That's not a prideful action.

People usually think of a Pharisee as some sort of cartoonish villain. They would always dress in black, with black teeth. The type that would steal candy from a baby and leave their grandmother tied up on the railroad tracks.

But a real-life Pharisee is different. He smiles. He's nice. He's friendly. He often helps people in need. He goes to church. Everybody thinks he's a good guy. You cannot tell a Pharisee by his behavior, because Pharisees often look and act very righteous. Sometimes, they might even look like the most loving people you ever knew.

So how do you tell if you're a Pharisee who exalts himself? You cannot see it in your actions. It's in your heart.

Do you think that you are a good person? You don't have to think you're perfect to be a Pharisee. But if you find yourself thinking, "Well, at least I'm not as bad as him . . ." then you might be a Pharisee.

You don't have to boast out loud. You don't have to brag to others. You can keep it to yourself, in your heart of hearts. Yet you are still a Pharisee. If you think that you are basically good and loving at heart, you might be a Pharisee.

It's so easy to slip into the Pharisee mind set. It's so easy, so natural to compare yourself to others. It is so easy to think that you are righteous in yourself. You can sit in the pew at church and be a Pharisee. So you have to be on your guard. Watch out, for the thoughts of the Pharisee spring up out of our sinful flesh and take over our thinking.

You can see people in some churches who raise their arms to heaven and sing loudly of how much they love Jesus. Then you are hearing the boasting of Pharisees to the accompaniment of electric guitars. As soon as church and worship become about how much you love, how much you have done, then you have become Pharisees.

Instead, church and worship should be about how poor, miserable sinners beg for God's mercy and forgiveness. Not centered on self but on the cross (†)

The tax collector didn't think he was only a sinner, but THE sinner. The English translations usually miss that little word, that direct article: "the." The tax collector didn't just think he was a bad sinner. He thought that next to him, no one else quite deserved the name "sinner." In his mind, he was as bad a sinner as they come.

Is that your attitude? Are you THE sinner? Are you as bad a sinner as any on earth? If so then you are like the tax collector. And remember, only tax collectors go home from God's house justified and righteous before God.

Every Sunday, the Church's liturgy encourages you to think like a tax collector. You confess that you are by nature sinful and unclean. You sing, "Lord, have mercy." There is even an ancient tradition to place your fist over your heart at the words, "Lord, have mercy," like the tax collector who beat his breast in humility and shame.

But speaking the words will not help you if your heart does not repent. Your sinful heart wants you to be a good Pharisee. This self-righteous desire is so strong in you that you would not be able to repent or believe in Christ at all, unless the Holy Spirit enlightened you and made you into a new creature.

Even now that He has made you new, the old Adam still remains. Sin and self-righteousness still lurk in your heart. We still must confess, "I am the sinner."

Within your heart there is as much sin as in anyone else. Your nature is stained as black with sin as any robber or adulterer or murderer. This isn't hyperbole or exaggeration of any kind. Every human heart contains darkness and abomination. You may not see it or feel it. But God's own Word says that it is so, so you must believe it.

When you confess your sin you will then also hunger and thirst for God's forgiveness. The tax collector said, "Have mercy upon me." More literally translated, he said, "God be propitious to me, make atonement for me."

The word "atonement" is not a soft, gentle word. It is a word describing blood and violence and wrath. Sin is so deadly and horrifying that it requires a serious and severe solution. Sin requires blood.

In the Old Testament, lambs and goats and bulls were sacrificed to satisfy the anger of God against sin. But it was never enough. There needed to be a bigger atonement. A holier and more precious blood had to be spilled to solve the problem of sin and death, once and for all.

All the tax collectors of the world were begging God that He should provide an atonement of blood. All our human attempts at atonement could not succeed. God had to provide the lamb for the sacrifice.

One perfect spotless Lamb; one perfect sacrifice; one shedding of blood, and one death for all sins; Nothing less than the Lamb of God could atone for your sins. His blood alone is holy enough to erase all your sins from God's record. He alone was precious enough as God's own Son to satisfy His Father's fiery anger against all sins, including yours.

The Pharisee inside us wants us to believe that sin is not so serious. At least, my sin is not so bad. Surely blood and suffering aren't necessary. Sure I've made a few little mistakes, I think, but surely that doesn't require God's only Son, to die on the Cross.

A Pharisee doesn't think that he needs atonement. Likewise, a Pharisee doesn't think that he needs the forgiveness of sins in worship. He may attend worship for all kinds of other reasons, but not because he wants forgiveness. Some churches pride themselves on being full of Pharisees and have even removed the confession of sins from the service.

But a tax collector yearns for forgiveness. He desires it so much because he knows what a horrible sinner he is. Are you the horrible sinner? I know you are, because Scripture tells me that you are. But I hope that you know it, too.

You are not righteous of yourself. But here in God's house, He declares you righteous. He absolves you, and feeds you the food of redemption. If you are here because you think that you are already good, then you'll receive nothing here. If you keep on thinking that you are good, then you'll eventually become offended and leave this house, because there are so many expert "sinners" here.

God's house is meant for sinners. If you don't think you're one of them, then you might as well leave now. But if you know how great a sinner you are, then God will satisfy you with His atonement. For (†) Christ's Blood was shed for you and He forgives you all your sins. So this is the right place for you.

Repent and believe, and you will be lifted up to the highest heaven, exalted with angels and archangels and saints of old. Humble yourself, and God will exalt you to His right hand. For by the blood of Christ all of your sins have been forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost - For Jesus sake and in Jesus name, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN!