

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity  
Luke 18:9-14

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our meditation today is based off of the Gospel reading, especially the final verse, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Do you know why you come to church?

Certainly prayer is one of the reasons you come to church. Jesus tells us a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. He is telling the parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” (v. 9) Even though Jesus is talking directly to people who are self-righteous and disdainful of others, it has something to teach us all.

Jesus picks two characters that were known well to His listeners. A Pharisee would have been well thought of in the community. They were the experts on the Scriptures and living well. They seemed like very sage and pious men. They had it together, in other words. With our fractured society, it’s hard to come up with an equivalent group of well respected people today. If you were to look at external appearances, it would seem that the Pharisees were the “true” Christians, or people of God.

On the other hand, you won’t find a more despised person than the tax collector. He was a traitor to the community and profited by fleecing his own people. They collected taxes for the Romans and made a profit by overcharging the common man. And many were very rich. It’s also hard to come up with a modern day equivalent but career politicians do come to mind. If you were to look at external appearances, it would seem that tax collectors were despicable and worshiped the false god of mammon.

But Jesus doesn't look at external appearances. He looks at the heart. As He said to Samuel when he went to anoint a new king for Israel, "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Sam 16:7) His choice of two men emphasizes this point. From outward appearances, one man looks like a true man of God and the other man doesn't. But Jesus doesn't look at external appearances. He looks at the heart.

Today, the two men teach us about the heart of man and the heart of God, our Father.

The Pharisee doesn't understand his heart and the tax collector understands his all too well.

The Pharisee looked to his external actions to determine if he was keeping the law. He would look upon his action of not harming anyone as keeping the fifth commandment. Jesus, however, reveals that mere external behavior does not keep the law.

[Jesus said:] "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21-22)

[Jesus said:] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (Matthew 5:43-46)

Luther summarizes it beautifully in his explanation of the fifth commandment: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.” (LSC)

The Pharisee gave great dinner parties for his friends and influential people. He loved to give to the temple which he boasts of in his prayer, “I give tithes of all that I get.” (v. 12) This was over and above what God required. He despised the tax collector, sick, and poor. He fooled himself that he was keeping the fifth commandment and the other commandments and therefore God was pleased with him because of this.

We do the same when we turn God’s Word into a list of do’s and don’ts and think God’s happy with us because we externally keep His Word. Like the Pharisee, we water down the law, and usually the laws we really like, and feel good about keeping them. We place trust in our external works for our security in our standing before God. We think we keep the law. But Jesus says, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) In other words, you must keep the law of God perfectly and “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it,” (James 2:10) as James tells us.

But don’t think you can live however you want. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–10) If you persist in gross sin, like adultery which is any kind of sex outside of marriage, you endanger your eternal life.

The tax collector understood his own heart. He knew that he was a sinner. He was not trying to deny his sin or cover it up. He simply says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” (v. 13)

We say the same thing in our confession of sins, “be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.” (LSB 184) We acknowledge before God that “we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left done.” (LSB 151)

And do not think that merely saying the words is what guarantees mercy from God. That is the trap that the Roman Catholics fell into with the Lord’s Supper. They believe that just by going through the actions, they receive the forgiveness of sins. We know that to be “worthy” of the Lords’ Supper is to have “faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins...’ for the words ‘for you’ require all hearts to believe.” (LSC) “The one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (v. 14) That is, the one who believes that he is a sinner before God is prepared to receive mercy and be exalted.

The prayer of the tax collector teaches us about the heart of God as well. “Be merciful to me” does not quite capture the full effect of the original Greek. The Greek word is not strictly “be merciful.” “Propitiate my sin” would be closer to the truth, that is, have mercy upon me and I appeal to the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat on top of the ark of the covenant.

There are two great celebrations for believers in the Old Testament: the day of atonement and the Passover. On the day of atonement, the high priest would pick two goats. One goat would be for the atonement of sins and the other would be sent into the wilderness. The blood of the goat for the sin atonement would be sprinkled over the mercy seat which is on the top of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies. The high priest would do this once a year on the day of atonement and that’s the only day he would be permitted to enter the holy of holies. The word for the mercy seat is the same word the tax collector uses to ask for mercy from the Lord. He wants the Lord to pass over his sins because of the atoning blood on the mercy seat.

This, of course, brings to mind the other great celebration of the Old Testament believers which is the Passover. They celebrated the blood of the lambs that was spread on doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their homes and not kill their firstborn. It is the celebration of God saving His people from the slavery to the Egyptians, but more deeply, it celebrates God saving His people from slavery to sin.

The tax collector got this. He knew the heart of God. The heart of God is mercy.

God took on human flesh so that He might keep the law of God perfectly. He is perfect like His heavenly Father. God took on human flesh so that He might be the spotless sin bearer and shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins. He died during Passover and His blood pays for sin and saves His people “who are born, not of blood, [that is who aren’t a direct descendant of Abraham, who are born not] of the will of the flesh, [that is who can’t make themselves worthy by their good works, who are not born] of the will of man, [that is who can’t make themselves worthy by their good intentions,] but of God, [that is you are made a child of God purely by His mercy and action.] That is pure mercy based upon God’s loving kindness. Jesus on the cross for sinners is the heart of God. God’s mercy for you reveals His heart to you.

The same blood that flowed from the side of Jesus flows to you in His Supper. God’s mercy touches you personally and you’re strengthened in your faith and life.

You come to church for many reasons. The biggest reason you come to church is the same reason the tax collector went to the temple. The biggest reason is to receive the mercy of God. And when you receive that mercy, you’re made righteous before God. The humble is exalted.

May you continue to live humbly on the mercy that God freely dispenses.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.