

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Luke 18:9-14

I'm sure you've heard of military bearing. Boot camp breaks you down and retrains you to be a standard soldier, marine, sailor or airman. No matter how long you live, you still bear marks of this training. No matter how long a serviceman or servicewoman has been out of the military, civilians usually notice there's something different about them. They have a military bearing.

It's kind of the same when you're a Christian. You're baptized and your old man is drowned in the waters of baptism and you're given a new identity. Pagans, or non-believers, should notice there's something different about you. So let me ask you a question:

What does a Christian bearing look like?

Or, another way to ask it is:

What is it a pagan sees in your behavior that marks you as a Christian?

[pause]

Now, there are a lot of things that probably came to your mind. Is there any one mark or characteristic that came to mind?

[pause]

From today's Gospel, I believe we learn that one of the major marks of Christian bearing is humility. And, of course, I mean a true humility and not a false humility. It has been my experience that people can see through a false humility pretty easily.

So, why are Christians humble? Our Gospel text teaches us today that there are, at least, three things that makes a Christian humble.

I

[Christians Love the Law of God!]

First, Christians love the Law of God. Christians are marked by Psalm 119:

⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;

let me not wander from your commandments!

¹¹ I have stored up your word in my heart,

that I might not sin against you.

¹² Blessed are you, O LORD;

teach me your statutes!

¹³ With my lips I declare

all the rules of your mouth.

¹⁴ In the way of your testimonies I delight

as much as in all riches.

¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts

and fix my eyes on your ways.

¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;

I will not forget your word.

Word, commandments, statutes, decrees, testimonies, and precepts are all words for the Word of God. Most of those words have the concept of God's Law. They all contain Law and Gospel, but the Psalmist here is primarily talking about God's Law. And God's Law hurts because we are sinners. That is why the author of Hebrews describes it this way:

"The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom and account must be given." (Hebrews 4:12-13)

The author of Hebrews is talking about full-force law. Way too many Christians have a watered-down law that they think they can keep. They are like the Pharisee in today's reading. The Pharisee had diluted and changed God's Law and deluded himself that he kept it:

He didn't commit gross sins like the "extortioners, [the] unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." and he boasts that he "fast[s] twice a week; [and] give[s] tithes of all [he] get[s]." (v. 11-12)

The pharisees were guilty of fleecing widows just like extortioners. They treated others with contempt like the unjust. They weren't commanded to fast twice a week but took pride in doing so. They weren't commanded to give tithes on every single little thing they received, but they were compulsive and legalistic about giving tithes. The Psalm 119 passage I read earlier doesn't sound like the pharisee!

The tax collector understood the law. He was so torn up by it that the only thing he could say was “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13) The tax collectors had a horrible reputation. They were race traitors. They betrayed their brothers to collect taxes for the despised Romans. And they became rich by over collecting what was required. They were despised by their Jewish brothers and were treated as outcasts. This tax collector knew the law of God and was crushed by it. By outward appearances, he may not have seemed to know Psalm 119, but his humility showed that he understood it completely. Even though the Law of God cut him to the quick, he faced it and threw himself upon God’s mercy.

You must face the Law of God as well. It crushes you and it actually kills you. You don’t even know how bad a sinner you are. You must be instructed by the Holy Spirit through the Law of God about how wicked you truly are. This humbles you. This makes you understand that you’re no better than Jeffrey Dahmer or Jeffrey Epstein in your heart. You may have not committed the outward gross sins they did, but you have hated and lusted in your heart. In God’s eyes, you are just as wicked as Jeffrey Dahmer or Jeffrey Epstein in your heart in your old man. You don’t get rid of the old man until you physically die. That is why It’s so important for you to drown your old man in the Law of the Lord daily. In repentance the full force of God’s Law produces the attitude of humility.

How many of us recite the forgiveness of sins each week by rote instead of true humility? Stay in God’s Law!

II

[Christians Know the Price of their Sin.]

First, Christians love the Law of God. Second, Christians know the price their sin cost Jesus of Nazareth.

Sin must be paid for. Listen to God's righteous judgment:

34 Draw near, O nations, to hear,
and give attention, O peoples!
Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;
the world, and all that comes from it.
² For the LORD is enraged against all the nations,
and furious against all their host;
he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.
³ Their slain shall be cast out,
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;
the mountains shall flow with their blood.
⁴ All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.
All their host shall fall,
as leaves fall from the vine,
like leaves falling from the fig tree.
⁵ For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens;
behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom,
upon the people I have devoted to destruction...
⁸ For the LORD has a day of vengeance,
a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.
(Isaiah 34:1-5, 8)

God's righteous anger must be satisfied. God's anger is not futile or impotent. It is a powerful all-consuming fire.

It must be quenched by a bloody sacrifice, but not just any bloody sacrifice. The Son of God, fully God and fully Man, offers the perfect bloody sacrifice on the cross to atone for all sin.

The sin of the Pharisee and the sin of the tax collector and your sin put Jesus on the cross. The Christian understands the cost of sin. He or she understands that his or her sin put Jesus on the cross. They understand that every sin they commit is like slapping Jesus in the face. This is why Paul is incredulous asking, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2)

The Pharisee slaps Christ by assuming God's grace by the power of his own goodness. He presumes to think that his sin doesn't cost a blood sacrifice to be atoned for. Unless he repents, he will stand before God clothed in his miserable good works and be consumed by God's holy fire.

The tax collector understood that his sin required blood sacrifice. The translation of "be merciful to me" is unhelpful in this case. The Greek word actually means propitiation and not mercy. A different Greek word means "mercy." Propitiation is the technical theological word for God's mercy seat on the ark of the covenant where the high priest would sprinkle the blood from the atonement of sin once a year.

The blood of Jesus was sprinkled upon the mercy seat of God so that all your sin is atoned for. When you ask God for mercy, you're asking Him to remember the holy, precious blood of Jesus that was sprinkled on you in your baptism to make you pure and holy. In humility, you ask God to cover you with the blood of Jesus.

III

[Christians Love the Gospel of God!]

First, Christians love the Law of God. Second, Christians know the price their sin cost Jesus of Nazareth. Third, Christians love the Gospel of God.

The Law of God is perfect leading to repentance, but it cannot motivate you to live like a Christian. You must have the promises of God. Before God judged Adam and Eve in the garden, He gave the promise of a savior that would defeat sin, death, and the serpent, Satan. God's Old and New Testament are full of the promises of God. Listen to some of the promises of God:

12 You will say in that day:

“I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
that you might comfort me.

² “Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation.”

(Isaiah 12:1-2)

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,

nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.

¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

(Psalm 103:8-14)

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16-18)

These wonderful promises can only be grasped by faith. The Pharisee tried to grasp the promises of God by his works and went home unrighteous. The tax collector clung to the promises of God in faith and went home justified. If you attempt to grasp the promises of God by your works, you will go home unrighteous. If you grasp the promises of God in faith, you will go home righteous. Proudness refuses the grace of God. Humility happily receives the wonderful unmerited grace of God.

The Christian is marked by humility. But he or she is also marked by something more.

The promises of God are fantastic and can only be learned by the instruction of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. Sounds familiar, doesn't it. The Christian receives His life through faith by the Word of God. So, it is fair to say that Christians are marked as a people of the Word. They love it. They meditate upon it. They sing it. They discuss it. It is in their heart and minds and on their lips. May these words of Scripture be true about you:

⁴“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

The Word of God will mark you with a Christian bearing. God grant that you bear His name with humility and grace.

In Jesus' name. Amen.