

Sermon for October 30, 2016 - Reformation

Luke 18:9-14 (NIV84)

Theme: Go Home Justified . . .

- 1) *Not because of your works,*
- 2) *But by faith.*

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

499 years ago, on October 31, 1517, a professor/monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the Castle Church Door in Wittenberg, Germany. The theses were debate points he wanted to discuss with fellow clergy regarding the sale of indulgences. Luther rightly noted that the practice of selling indulgences was tantamount to selling forgiveness. It was unscriptural and wrong. A person can neither buy nor earn his way into heaven. The only way a person can obtain eternal life is if God justifies him – something the LORD does for all who look to him for forgiveness in repentance and faith.

I can think of no better story that illustrates this truth than the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector, which we will consider under the theme: **Go home justified . . .**
1) not because of your works, 2)but by faith.

Part One: Go home justified, not because of your works.

Our sermon text takes place while Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die for the sins of the world. Sadly, not everyone who followed him confessed their need for his forgiveness. Like the rich synagogue ruler who once told Jesus that he had kept all of God's commandments, some of Jesus' hearers thought that they too were good enough to earn eternal life. They never stole, committed adultery or murdered anyone. They were good people. Wouldn't God let them into heaven because of this?

Sadly, most people today have the same attitude that the Jews had back then. I can't count how many times people have told me: "Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran – none of those labels make a difference. All that matters is that you live a good life - following the golden rule of treating others as you yourself would want to be treated. Just be good and you will get to heaven."

Be good? As opposed to what? A devil? An angel? A 2016 presidential candidate? Saying,

“be good and you’ll get to heaven,” is tantamount to trusting in your own righteousness to save you, and Jesus has something to say about that. We read:

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:* ¹⁰ *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

In order to understand the contrast Jesus is making in this parable, we need to understand something about Jewish culture. The Pharisees were highly respected by the people of Jesus’ day. They lived according to the letter of God’s law – even going above and beyond what the Bible required of them. I guess a good modern day example would be monks and nuns. Do you ever hear people saying bad things about them? Rarely. And why is that? Because they seem to have turned their backs on worldly pursuits in order to dedicate their lives to God. They pray six times a day and seem careful to fulfill every law of their orders. Many have taken a vow of poverty and some provide social relief. There are few people the world considers holier than monks and nuns. The same was true regarding the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

On the other hand, there were few things worse than a tax-collector. The Jews considered them extortionists and traitors. Maybe a modern day parallel would be what we would call “a thug” – someone who harasses and steals from the helpless. The Jews hated tax-collectors so much that a number of rabbis taught that their sins could never be forgiven. They were doomed to hell.

Even though the temple was open all day for private prayer, there is good reason to believe that the Pharisee and tax-collector came during either the morning or evening sacrifice – when a Lamb was offered up for the sins of all people. This sacrifice foreshadowed the atonement the Messiah would bring through his sacrifice for the sins of the world.

¹¹ *The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.* ¹² *I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’*

Notice that the Pharisee was so confident of his righteousness that he was not afraid to stand as close to the sanctuary as possible with his arms stretched out in prayer. Now, in and of itself, there was nothing wrong with the posture the Pharisee took. The Jews regularly prayed with their arms stretched out ready to receive mercy from God. This Pharisee, however, didn’t have his arms stretched out to receive mercy, his posture was more: “look at me – who I am and what I have done.” He mentions God once in feigned gratitude, and then goes on talking about himself. The law encouraged fasting once a year? He fasted twice a week. The law commanded giving a tenth of certain items? He gave a tenth of everything he had. Compared to all the crooks and criminals in the world, he was a saint!

But notice who he didn’t compare himself to: the LORD. And how could he? I mean even this Pharisee would acknowledge that the LORD was far more righteous than he! And yet, if we are going to make comparisons this is exactly the comparison God wants us to make. He doesn’t say to us: don’t be as greedy as the habitual robbers and lust less than those living in adultery. No, Jesus says: *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*¹ If you are going to

make a comparison, how do you compare with God? If we do this, we will be forced to confess that we *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*ⁱⁱ

But back to the Pharisee in our text. We might be tempted to think: “What a blind, pretentious buffoon: considering himself more worthy of God’s love than others.” And yet aren’t we all tempted to do the very thing? Let me give you an example: more than once I have heard a Christian say to me, “Pastor, I just can’t believe that God would be willing to forgive the really evil people of this world – you know, like terrorists, rapists and pedophiles. Regardless of how repentant they are, there has to be a limit to what the LORD is willing to forgive, right?” Now let me ask you: how is this any different than what the Pharisee said: “*God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers*”?

Yes, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of the Pharisee: thinking that our own goodness or works merit God’s favor and forgiveness. It’s all too easy to compare ourselves to others instead of God’s law. But here’s the thing: God takes no pleasure in our bragging, boasting or comparing. He sees what’s in our heart. He knows how deeply flawed we are better than we know it ourselves. As I mentioned before: God demands nothing less than perfection. We are not perfect. Our flawed goodness, therefore, doesn’t earn us anything but hell. The LORD wants us to realize this so that, like the tax collector, we can come before him in all humility – turning to him alone for the free gift of forgiveness, life and salvation that he offers us through the Gospel.

Part Two: Go home justified by faith.

Our text continues:

¹³ *"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

The tax-collector knew his sins all too well and they terrified him. He knew that, in and of himself, he had no right to come into God’s holy presence. The constant beating of his breast was his way of saying: *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.*ⁱⁱⁱ There was nothing he could offer God, nothing he could do to change his past. He was a sinner.

And yet look: this tax-collector came in hope. He came believing the Old Testament promise that God will forgive every wicked person who turns to him in repentance and faith. He came believing that God will send a Savior, who will sacrifice himself for his sins. This is why he prayed: “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*”

Now, I have to say something about his prayer that you won’t catch in any of our English translations. Unlike other prayers for “mercy” found in the Bible, this tax-collector uses a different word. A better translation would be: “God make atonement for^{iv} me a sinner.” In other words the tax collector is not just asking for general “mercy.” He is asking for forgiveness. And what makes him bold to ask for this forgiveness? His faith in God’s Old Testament promise to send a Savior for sin!

Yes, God's Law and Gospel had worked repentance and faith in the heart of this tax collector – a faith that not only led him to see the sheer horror of his sins, but also to hold God to his promise to forgive all who turn to him in repentance and faith. And this is exactly what the tax collector did: he repented of his sin. He didn't compare himself to others. Actually, if you were to read this text in its original language, you would see how his prayer reflects the trustworthy saying St. Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*^v

Which of those two men do you think when home “justified” – that is, declared free and forgiven of all sin and at peace with God? Jesus tells us:

"I tell you that this man [the tax collector], rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Do you understand why the tax-collector went home forgiven and not the Pharisee? It's because the tax collector had faith in God's promised salvation, and the LORD kept his promise: Jesus, the Lamb of God, offered himself up as the once and for all sacrifice for sin. He suffered the death and damnation we deserved. He paid for our sins in full. It is finished – just like God said it would be.

King David wrote: *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*^{vi} Therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ: don't come before God bragging about your works, or comparing yourself with others. Don't come before God thinking that you deserve him to hear you. Come before him with a humble and penitent heart – confessing your sins with sorrow. Come trusting in his mercy to forgive and help you live a new life to His glory. This is what repentance is all about – the repentance Luther encouraged in his very first of 95 theses that he posted on the Castle Church in Wittenberg 499 years ago: *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*

Yes, like the tax-collector in our sermon text, be always turning from sin and to Jesus. We will never be perfect on this earth, but we are forgiven for Christ's sake. Trust what God says about his grace and live in it. Then, like Zacchaeus, St. Paul, Luther and many other great sinner/saints who have gone before us, we will find both the motivation and power to live our lives in obedience to God's will – not perfectly, but perfectly forgiven.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: go home from Church today justified - not because of who you are or what you have done, but for Christ's sake. You are right to trust in his mercy. Let this trust renew your zeal to live as his dearly loved child on this earth. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 5:48 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Romans 3:23 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 7:18 NIV84

^{iv} Literally: “expiate”

^v 1 Timothy 1:15-16 NIV84

^{vi} Psalm 51:17 NIV84