

Luke 18:9-14

I appreciate when the gospel writer introduces one of Jesus' parables with the point Jesus is making before we even hear it. Like last week, "Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they should keep praying and not lose heart." I hope that everyone has been praying this week. Praying that you do not lose heart, do not lose faith. Praying for one another also. Keep at it for we have a righteous judge who desires to hear our prayers and will answer them in His way and time.

This morning we hear the point of another parable. It is about "a man who trusted in his own righteousness and look down on others with contempt."

It about two men who went up to the temple to pray, a religious Pharisee and a scum of the earth tax collector. Both appeal to the heavenly judge. The Pharisee stands in front of the sanctuary appealing to all of his accomplishments, his hard work and progress that he has made in his walk with God and law keeping.

At the same time Jesus introduces us to a man who is in the far back corner of the sanctuary and finds himself a sinner. The thing this tax collector wants is not justice. He desires mercy. And that is his only hope.

At first glance it appears Jesus has painted a picture of a good guy and bad guy. We have picture of a good man and bad man. The Pharisee had committed his life to God, really trying to live the holy life. The tax collector was the dirt of society who cheated people at every opportunity that presented itself because his interest was in himself and his own greed.

Which one would trust to make a bank deposit in your behalf or instruct your children? Most would say the pharisee because of his holy lifestyle, but in the end, Jesus tells us that it the tax collector who goes home justified. And the one we may have trusted, does not.

If look closely at this parable these people may have more in common than we might expect.

First, they both go up to the Temple to pray. They both go to the place where God calls his people to come into his presence and receive his gifts. Neither of them practices a private religion. Both have come into the midst of the community of faith.

Second, they both offer a prayer and might I be bold to say with a sincere heart. "I give thee thanks..." Though the tax collector prays in the form of a petition he has to be thankful that there is such a thing as the mercy of God. You might be able say that he is thankful that he can even come to the temple, even as a 4th class citizen and even approach the Holy God and have his prayer heard.

The pharisee is thankful to God that he his great successful guy and is free of sinful desires. Could this be so wrong? If you are going to have the ten commandments, they do need to be taken seriously and honored and lived put in one's life. The progress he has made is very impressive. And this is very clear to him as looks over his shoulder and notices the tax collector in the back corner. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

What is so wrong with setting your life in line with the commandments of God because one day you will face the judge. In fact a Sunday School student once said this world would be wonderful place to live if everyone obeyed the ten commandments. But if we think about this, we can't keep the ten commandments, because as St. Writes in Romans is that we all fall short of the glory of God.

It is clear that something is wrong with the Pharisee and his prayer. It is his pride that takes over. It is his pride that causes him to exalt himself and treat others with contempt. It is so easy to take a good thing and then corrupt it in our own hands.

Likewise, as corrupt, and deplorable as the tax collector is, there is one thing that is good. He is contrite, sorrowful, and humble. He is in the back corner and does not even lift his eyes to heaven, beating he breast and prays, "Be merciful to me a sinner." Is that a wonderful prayer?

But be careful, even this can go bad. You can be prideful about your humility. "So I thank you God that I am not like this Pharisee." When I sin, at least I admit it! At least don't try to pretend to be perfect like this Pharisee. O thankyou that I am not like this Pharisee.

This leads us to the third point of similarity between these two. They both have a self-perception. They have a picture of their of their character and worth.

And this where the distinction between the two becomes clear. It is here where we can understand the judgement Jesus makes between the two. IT how they arrived at their self-perception. IT is Pharisee who compares himself with other people. The Pharisee chooses a tax collector in which to compare himself to. And Pharisee in his own eyes come out smelling like a rose. At least he can keep his temptations under control. Not like the undisciplined tax collector who lets the demons run free.

This Pharisee will run others down to make himself look better.

With the tax collector it is different. He no one to compare himself with. There is no one else in his field of vision except God. He would not lift his eyes to heaven. He does not look side to side. God's Word is his standard. If he looked up every law and every jot and tittle of the law, he would be judged and against it and it would not look very pretty. He looks to God and has no

other prayer to cry, "Be merciful to me O God a sinner."

The pharisee sees his life through in comparison with other sinners and especially the tax collector. The Tax Collector sees his life through the Cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ is the lens which God see us all who stand or hide behind it, or those who put their hope and faith in its work for salvation. The cross is the fountain of life from which God's mercy flows through the shed blood of is Son. It is the fountain of life for all who thirst for its life giving water of forgiveness and refreshment that only God can give.

In this parable Jesus desires that when we measure ourselves against God's Word, we see only sinner and leads to pray, "Be merciful to me a sinner."

Make no mistake, God sees us all through and through. He knows our heart. I cannot fool God with my pious actions. It comes down to the only time I can stand before God is when I stand, "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood shed for me and that thou biddest me come to thee."

And what a confession of faith that is. It is confession believing that Jesus came into this world for sinners. IT has to trust that God will be merciful to sinners and not judge us according to the standard of His law, but through another standard, which being a standard so low and degenerate, and that standard is the cross of Christ who became sin for us. He took all the sin of the world on himself so that against that cross he sees only saint for Christ's sake.

This is our only plea. It is the only plea a sinner can make. It is a plea that assures us that God sees us not according to our own self-image, but through the image Our Lord created us to be and through new life we have in the waters of Holy Baptism.

One closing thought. The Tax collector went home that day from the Temple justified. I wonder what difference it made in his life. Did he go home thinking now that I have the assurance that God will be merciful to me, I can go on with life the way I lived it, extorting, and committing adultery as before? Or did he go home with the amendment of life thinking "How can I go on with the old sinful life?"

Let us hope it was second. Let us hope that the next time he returns to the Temple next week he is new and improved guy, and thanking God for his goodness and the work he has done. Saying I thank you that I am not like other tax collectors. Oops, you see how easy it is for something good can go bad in our hands.

Lord, Be merciful to me sinner. Amen

