

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

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus said those words in the Gospel reading today. Those words are important and convey something about yourself. So, what does this mean? Well, listen again to that parable, “[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.”

Textbook examples exist for a reason. You read and study a textbook and then from those examples you can apply the attributes, qualities, and principles to recognize and diagnose when these things pop up or are manifested in life. The Pharisee is a textbook example of self-righteousness. He thinks he’s righteous and looks at others with contempt. The Pharisee, in the parable, would give answer to the question, “What does God think about you?” with “God sees that I am good or at least I am better than those around me who are sinners.” He’s a textbook example of this and you can spot his self-righteousness from a mile away.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is a textbook example of repentance and faith. He knows his sin and confesses his sin. He clings to the only hope he has in this life as a sinner, the mercy of God. Even his body language conveys this as he beats his breast and does not lift his eyes to heaven. In the *Confiteor*, a confessional rite in the church (a form of it is in our hymnal in the service of Compline), it was common when confessing sins to beat one’s breast saying he sinned, “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” You also have heard or even used a phrase of this in your life from the Latin form of this prayer, “*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*” The tax collector is a textbook example of a sinner who repents and clings to God’s mercy, he clings to Christ. He has faith.

Another fascinating thing about this tax collector in the parable is that he doesn’t simply cry out for mercy. The word used here in Greek is the word of atonement. He’s crying out to God to atone for his sin. He knows he’s a sinner. He knows sin must be answered for. He knows he needs his sin to be atoned for. He’s crying out for one who is the propitiation for his sin, Jesus.

Jesus, then, lays both men before you in the parable and he preaches to you. His purpose is to show you how one is justified, that is righteous in the sight of God. The question asked of you then is, “who are you?” When you look at yourself you see them both. Both men preach to you about who you are in this world and what this means as you stand before God. One is a warning, and the other is a proclamation of comfort. So, listen and take seriously what Jesus said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Unpacking this further, let’s go back to the Old Testament reading today for another example for you to examine your life. “Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’”

The nature of sin is to try to justify itself. Even before Cain killed Abel, he was jealous of his brother’s offering and how God was pleased with him. He had contempt for his brother. After killing Abel, Cain then tries to divert the blame away from himself so that his hands are clean of his brother’s blood. But he got this honestly. His parents, Adam and Eve, did a similar thing when God confronted them after the Fall into sin. In Genesis 3 it

says, “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” Adam blamed his wife and Eve blamed the serpent. Neither one confessed he or she had sinned against the Lord. Now their son, Cain, follows after his parents.

The blame game is a form of self-justification, trying to think one is righteous in God’s sight even when God says differently. Piggy backing off that is to try to compare yourself to others with the purpose of seeing them with contempt and exalting yourself over them is a form of self-justification. It’s easy to see in the cases of Cain and Adam and Eve but what about when it hits home? What about when you go about your life refusing to hear God’s word? What about when you have been taught the things of God but willing believe and live against those things which God has taught you? What’s your reaction when you stand before God’s law and see that you have sinned against him? What’s your answer to what God says? Is it to blame someone or something else? “This person really hurt me and my family.” Is it to rationalize that you were justified in your actions? “Times are different now and we need to change our thinking” or “at least I didn’t do like he did.” Is it to try and silence God by calling him a liar that his word isn’t true but thinking you haven’t done anything wrong? “I believe in Jesus, but I just don’t agree with everything the Bible says, besides, my faith is my own. I don’t need to hear God’s word and be a part of the church. I’m spiritual but not religious.” None of those responses or mindsets come from a humble heart. Remember what Jesus says, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Repent lest you go home to house not justified but condemned.

“To you, O Lord, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help.” In Romans 7, God inspired St. Paul to write, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Notice those words of the hymn of the day you sang a few minutes ago, “Oh, how great is your compassion, faithful Father, God of grace, that with all our fallen race in our depth of degradation you had mercy so that we might be saved eternally!” Remember what Jesus said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” In Philippians 2 it says about Jesus, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.”

In 2 Corinthians 5 it says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Again, in Galatians 4 it is written, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

God’s mercy is found and known in Jesus who has taken on your sin. Your guilt has been placed upon Christ. By the righteous life and atoning death of Jesus you are forgiven. He is risen from the dead proclaiming that you are justified. You now have a righteousness, but this righteousness isn’t your own it’s the righteousness of

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Jesus counted to you on account of Christ, and this is received through faith. Ephesians 2 beautifully preaches to you what is yours in Christ by grace through faith in him. Listen again to those words and know God is speaking to you and what is yours. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

The hymn of day also preaches to you where you find your comfort and cling to as you go through this life as a saint of God who in humility clings to Jesus and God has exalted you. “Firmly to our soul’s salvation witnesses your Spirit, Lord, in your sacraments and word. There he sends true consolation, giving us the gift of faith that we fear not hell nor death.” This very moment you know that you are justified. You know that you stand righteous in the sight of God. Sin, hell, the devil, and death have no claim on you. Why? Your sin is forgiven. You are baptized into Christ. Your Lord feeds you with his own true body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins and where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

Rejoice this day dear people of God. Cling to Jesus crucified for you. He has taken your sin upon himself, and you have his righteousness by grace through faith in him. You are exalted for you belong to Christ. Not only that but the day is coming when you will be exalted as you are raised from grave never to see sin, death, and the assaults of the devil ever again. That is the glorious and exalted future you have because of your Lord who humbled himself for your sake. God is indeed merciful to you a sinner and that is your redemption. Jesus said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” This is most certainly true and in faith the church cries out in all boldness and confidence, “Lord, your mercy will not leave me; ever will your truth abide. Then in you I will confide. Since Your Word cannot deceive me, my salvation is to me safe and sure eternally. I will praise your great compassion, faithful Father, God of grace, that with all our fallen race in our depth of degradation you had mercy so that we might be saved eternally.”

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