

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

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

Jesus teaches you this morning with another parable and it’s pretty straightforward. At the beginning of the reading, St. Luke gives you some insight which lays out a bit of context, “He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”

Those two issues, then, trusting in oneself and treating others with contempt, Jesus addresses in the parable and everything comes to a head at the end when the Lord says, “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Now, we could just stop here and “say don’t trust in yourself, trust in Jesus” and you know what? That would be sufficient in what the Lord says. It’s that simple really. The Christian faith is not complicated in that it’s only through faith in Christ is there salvation. God shows righteousness is only in Christ, and your righteousness is only in the Lord and through faith in Christ your Lord counts your faith as righteousness in his sight. You see that rightly in this reading along with countless other passages of Scriptures. What Jesus does though is explain this further in a way that warns and teaches you and drives you back to him. And in his proclamation to you, God gives you great comfort and assurance in Jesus for you.

Going back to the context is helpful. Trusting in oneself and treating others with contempt are related. It’s not a coincidence what you heard in the reading when the Pharisee prays what he does. Listen again to what the Holy Spirit caused to be written for you as Jesus said, “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.’

If your righteousness is found within yourself then that means, it’s yours and no one else possesses it. You dictate the standard and you set the boundaries and conveniently you are always in those standards and boundaries. Sure, there may be some overlap with what God says, the devil likes to do that in your conscience so that you can assuage yourself and rationalize it so that you can think your trust appears godly, at least outwardly. When the Pharisee lists those things in his prayer, there’s nothing wrong in not wanting to be those things He lists sinful behaviors the Christian should not desire nor want for anyone. Don’t be those things the Pharisee lists. The difference, though, is where the trust and heart of the Pharisee remain.

If you trust in yourself then others will never measure up. You will treat them with contempt in some way, shape, or form. It might not look like standing in church, looking around, and calling people out, that still could happen, but the heart will be the same. You will look at your neighbor with the eyes of judgment. You will see him or her and see their sin as what defines the person. You will grow confident in the fact that you are “not like other men.” Your life will be a constant point of comparison with others. You will find confidence in the fact that you are “at least not that person.” And then, if this all takes root in the deepest darkest places of your hearts, you will delight in yourself at the expense of others. Your joy will be in you and there will be the chief and deadly of all vices, pride.

Jesus places the Pharisee before you in the parable today not so that you can look at him and go, “I thank you that I am not like him.” No, Jesus knows you and your heart. He knows the times when you treat others with contempt even in silence. He sees the upturned noses and passing glances. Jesus knows who you fear, love, and trust in above all things. Jesus warns you about trusting in yourself and seeking righteousness apart from Christ, which is no real righteousness, it’s counterfeit and idolatrous. He calls you to see where trusting in yourself leads. “God opposes the proud but gives

grace to the humble.” Jesus warns you to have a different heart. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The parable doesn’t end with the Pharisee. Not only does Jesus warn you but he shows you where your confidence is found and what this means for you. St. Luke continues, “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!’”

Humility in a biblical sense looks into the mirror of God’s righteous law and sees the sinner staring back at him. It says with Peter in John 6, “Lord to whom shall we go?” It knows that in ourselves dwells nothing good on our own. The tax collector knew himself, to be sure, but there’s something Jesus teaches you about him. The tax collector trusted in Jesus. He cries out. But notice something about what he says. He cries out to God for mercy. In reality what he is crying out for is forgiveness. The Greek word here can be translated as “atone for my sins.” He’s crying out for redemption and he’s crying out to the one where he knows it’s found. He’s crying to God who is gracious and merciful, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He’s calling upon the Lord who puts sin away by shedding his blood for it, the one who is the propitiation for our sins, which is what this word is related to in Greek. The tax collector trusts in God who atones for his sin. The tax collector trusts in Jesus. The tax collector is righteous through faith.

St. Paul writes in the Epistle reading, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” Jesus is your righteousness. He is your redemption. He is the one who died on behalf of your sins. He is the one who was buried. He is the one who is raised from the dead. In Romans 3 God tells you, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

Jesus ends the parable by saying, “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The tax collector went home justified. That is righteous in the sight of God on account of the one who showed him mercy. He went home justified, that is righteous in the sight of God by God’s grace toward him in Christ through faith alone.

Article III of Formula of Concord provides this confession of what it means to have the righteousness of faith, “These treasures are brought to us by the Holy Spirit in the promise of the Holy Gospel. Faith alone is the only means through which we lay hold on, accept, apply, and take them for ourselves. This faith is God’s gift [Ephesians 2:8–9], by which we truly learn to know Christ, our Redeemer, in the Word of the Gospel and trust in Him. We trust that for the sake of His obedience alone we have the forgiveness of sins by grace, are regarded as godly and righteous by God the Father, and are eternally saved. Therefore, it is considered and understood to be the same thing when Paul says (a) we are “justified by faith” (Romans 3:28) or (b) “faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:5) and when he says (c) “by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19) or (d) “so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Romans 5:18). Faith justifies not because it is such a good work or because it is so beautiful a virtue. It justifies because it lays hold of and accepts Christ’s merit in the promise of the Holy Gospel. For this merit must be applied and become ours through faith, if we are to be justified by it. Therefore, the righteousness that is credited to faith or to the believer out of pure grace is Christ’s obedience, suffering, and resurrection, since He has made satisfaction for us to the Law and paid for *expiated* our sins. Christ is not man alone, but God and man in one undivided person. Therefore, He was hardly subject to the Law (because He is the Lord of the Law), just as He didn’t have to suffer and die for His own sake. For this reason, then, His obedience (not only in His suffering and dying, but also because He was voluntarily made under the Law in our place and fulfilled the Law by this obedience) is credited to us for righteousness. So, because of this complete obedience, which He rendered to His heavenly Father for us by doing and suffering and in living and dying, God forgives our sins. He regards us as godly and righteous, and He

eternally saves us. This righteousness is brought to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and in the Sacraments. It is applied, taken, and received through faith. Therefore, believers have reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, God's grace, sonship, and are heirs of eternal life."

The doctrine of Justification is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. You get justification wrong and everything else falls apart. Jesus teaches you about your justification today because it means everything. It's not just something academic or theoretical. You are righteous in the sight of God. You have a clear conscience before God on account of Jesus and his righteous life of obedience, his atoning death, and his resurrection from the grave.

Trusting in yourself leads to death. Likewise obscuring this treasure of your righteousness in Jesus leads to doubt and despair. If your faith is turned into a decision you have to make or if you have to add something to your faith like love or works, then everything collapses. Your faith in Jesus is a gift that he has given to you. It is nothing short of a miracle that the tax collector went home justified. It's nothing short of a miracle that you believe in Jesus as well. The Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel. No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. God made you who were dead in your trespasses and sin, alive in Christ.

God has done this and he has done it through his means delivering them to you. He has attached his promises to the baptismal waters, to his word, to his words of absolution, and to his Supper. In humility you don't exalt yourself but trust what God says as you are baptized into Christ, as he has done this to you and for you. In humility you hear his word and cling to it as it delivers to you Christ and his benefits. In humility you confess your sin and the one whom God has called and sent to you says, "your sin is forgiven" and you trust those words give you exactly what you have for the Lord does not lie and his word is living and active. In humility you kneel at this altar as a beggar who has nothing, and the Lord feeds you with his 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 life and salvation. You in humility cry out, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Your Lord is the one who this very instant sees you and says, "your sin is forgiven. You are my own."

Listening to this reading today, you know where your stand before God and how you "go home" as you leave this church building today. You are righteous. You go home justified. You go home, that is you go where God has called you to live in your church, your family, and the world around you. You get up each day as a baptized child of God. There's a reason why the daily prayers in the Small Catechism speak about making the sign of the cross in the morning when you get up and when you go to bed at night, it proclaims to you who you are and to whom you belong. You have been crucified and raised with Jesus in the waters of holy baptism. You have been clothed with him in the waters and his righteousness covers you. Even if this day should be your last on this earth you go to your eternal home justified on account of your Lord Jesus. You are absolutely, positively, certain in all this because your Lord is faithful. He is the one who tells you who you are in Christ. Stanzas 3 and 4 of the Hymn of the Day beautifully confess this as you sang a few minutes ago, "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. 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." The confidence of your righteousness and your salvation rests solely and completely in Jesus.

And here's another thing in all this today for you as one who belongs to Jesus and are righteous in his sight. The Holy Spirit informs and forms your new heart and mind and what this means for you in relationship to your neighbor. You don't look down on your neighbor in contempt, rather Jesus calls you to love your neighbor as yourself. In Romans 12 God teaches you, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Also in Philippians 2, the chapter that includes the Christ hymn about the humility and name of Jesus, God teaches you near the beginning of that chapter, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

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Your humility in Christ flows from your faith in him and as fruit extends to your neighbor as well. When you do see your neighbor sinning rather than saying, “I thank you that I am not like other men,” you hear the words of Galatians, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” That’s the new heart you have in Christ. This is the righteousness new life you live out as a fruit of your righteousness you receive passively through faith.

Dear saints of God, thanks be to God for his great compassion and mercy toward you. Your Lord has saved you. Jesus said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The tax collector had a Redeemer who is your same Redeemer, Jesus, who humbled himself and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Now in Christ, you are exalted. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith and go through this life knowing who you are in him. See your Lord Jesus and say, “there, Jesus crucified is my righteousness. He is my salvation. He is my life.” Go home today in that same comfort and confidence that you are justified in the sight of God on account of Christ. Get up each day and go to bed each night in that same confidence, boasting in the Lord, who is your righteousness. And when your final day should come, go home to your Lord who has conquered death and knowing that just as he is risen, so you shall be and you will forever be with him and all his saints forever.

“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.”

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