

“They Both Came to Pray” Luke 18:9-14 Trinity 11 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During the past Sundays our Sunday morning Gospel lessons have been moving us through the Gospel of Luke. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus tells another parable contrasting two men who went to the temple to pray.

In the temple of Jesus' day, a lamb was sacrificed at dawn for the sins of the people. A second similar sacrifice was offered at three in the afternoon. When the time came for the burning of incense, this was thought to be an appropriate time for private prayer. By this time in the service the sacrifice of the lamb had covered the sins of Israel and thus the “way to God was open for prayer”. The faithful could now approach God. It is likely that the two men in the parable were present for either the dawn or mid-afternoon ritual.

The Pharisee was very strict. He lived an obedient life. He wanted to be faithful to God. He wanted to please God. The Pharisee stood and thanked God that he was not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers. Then he counted his virtues.... He fasted and gave 10 percent of his wealth to the poor. He had kept the Jewish dietary laws. He was probably a very good guy. Honest. Truthful. He may have even belonged to several service clubs in his community. He may have served on the local school board. There is no doubt that he was admired in the community.

The other man was a tax collector. He worked for the Roman government. It was his job to collect taxes for the Romans. If people didn't pay, he could turn them into the authorities. Chief tax Collectors would bid on contracts for collecting taxes in certain districts. They were hated by the Jewish population as turncoats. They were considered cheaters. They often assessed the property more than the true value... that was their commission.

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It isn't hard to see the contrast. Both men stand before God. Granted, the Pharisee wants to stand before God by being better than thieves and rogues and adulterers, or even like that tax collector in the back of the temple. Luke says: He thanked God. But he should have stopped. He went on to list a litany of the things he does – He fasts twice a week, (when only once was required). He gives a 10th of his income. He wants to stand before God based on what he is and what he is doing.

The tax collector also stood before God. We only know that he is a tax collector, despised by his fellow Jews. He was a sinner. He prays for only one thing, God's mercy. “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The Pharisee drew these conclusions about himself by comparing himself to other people. Did you notice that? “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people.” When any of us compare ourselves with other people, it's easy to pick out those people who make us look good. The problem is that God doesn't judge that way. The tax collector didn't measure himself that way. He must have measured himself by the standard of God because he concluded that he was a sinner. He realized he did not have a leg to stand on. Only God can justify. Because God's Law presents an even more rigorous and imposing demand... Perfection. There are many in our culture who would like to do away with the “laws” of God. We see them removed from our schools, from our Legislature, from our media. They are tied to “religion”, and we can't have one religion's rules overshadow the rules of behavior or another religion. Besides, people in our culture want to make up their own rules for behavior, so they can justify their behavior.

Here's the reality. Every religion, every culture, every family, every community has rules to follow, for the purpose of keeping order, to keep society civil, or to please the “god” of their chosen religion. We

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have all seen families with rules for children that allow them to be disruptive, disrespectful in public, at school and in the home. Even “gangs” have rules. If the gang rules are disobeyed, the offender is found dead.

The point: When the Law is finished making accusations, when every mouth is silenced, when there is no more defense, when all our attempts to justify ourselves dissolve, then judgment is pronounced. We are all guilty. We all have “fallen short”. The ultimate question: How do I find peace, how do I find justification before “God”, for my eternal destiny?

Let’s look at how every human being is in this situation of finding “justification.” It began in the Garden of Eden. God set Adam and Eve up in a place of perfection. He said, “Here, this is for you. Enjoy it. Live in it. Reflect the love I’ve given to you in all that you do. In return, all I ask is this one little thing; don’t eat from this tree. Show your appreciation by not eating from this tree. Eat anything else you want, but don’t eat from this tree.” And then God added, “If you do eat from this tree, there are going to be some serious consequences. The perfect place I’ve given you won’t be perfect anymore. The limitless life of freedom I’ve given you will end and there will be an eternal punishment for you all who come after you.

They chose to break the one commandment God had asked them to keep; the one rule He had asked them to follow. They chose to listen to the lies of Satan. When the devil slithered up to them, he simply suggested that God was not being honest. They took the bait hook line and sinker. They sinned and found out that God, even if they didn’t like it, had been telling them the truth.

Now they had a new experience - Fear of judgment. They tried to hide. God found them. God reached out to them and told them: “I’m

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going to send my Son into the world to take your place. He will be born of a virgin so he can be one of you; He will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, so He can be perfect. He will carry your sins on His shoulders. He will lead a perfect, holy life, keeping all my Laws. He will resist temptation. He will die the death your disobedience deserves. Then my Son will rise from the dead so you and the entire world can be set free from your fear of judgment, your fear of death by faith in Him.

God told the truth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He fulfilled all of God’s Laws. He never sinned. And when any human being places their trust, their faith in Jesus, they will stand in the courtroom of Heaven, justified.

God knew that in the centuries to come other voices would proclaim: “You’re no sinner; you’re OK just the way you are.” God knew that someday some smooth voice would say: “Every religion is the same.” “All religions have different pathways to the same heaven.” God knew that some would say: “A God of love would never send someone to hell.” God knew that some voices would have great ethical behavior but deny the existence of a final judgment and Hell. God knows that the tendency of every human being is to first act like the Pharisee. Seeking to justify oneself, hoping the good deeds outweigh our broken promises, overcome our ethical failures.

God has offered the world His Son, Jesus to be your savior. His word is truth. A truth that can calm your conscience, erase your sins, and guarantee eternal life. God will never force Jesus upon you. God offers each person the opportunity to say “yes” or “No” to the sacrifice that Jesus gave on the cross. By God’s grace may you investigate your own heart, and cry out: “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Amen.