

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity  
22 & 23 August, Anno Domini 2020  
St. Luke 18:9-14  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“O God, I thank you that I am not like other men, homosexuals, abortionists, protestors, those hot messes on TV, terrorists, and even as this Pharisee. I go to church regularly. I tithe even though that command doesn’t apply to me any more. I work hard at my job. I’m healthy. I volunteer.” It’s really not that hard to out-Pharisee the Pharisee is it? We are very quick to pile on him (which only demonstrates our hypocrisy) and condemn him for his pride.

The truth of the matter is that we so often stroke our egos by exalting the sins of others rather than examining our own lives honestly in light of the Ten Commandments. We excuse or make light of our own sins and try to stand on our own piety or the impiety of someone else. Yet we have cozied up to the world, adopted its attitudes or at least turned a blind eye so that we can pretend it’s not so bad. We drink in its hedonism and perversions with our eyes and our ears because we wouldn’t want to feel left out or be labeled prudes. And though we know better, we justify ourselves by holding others in contempt. When we see others drowning under the weight and consequence of their sins do we reach out to rescue them or do we give them a sideways glance and shake our heads because they deserve it?

And the great irony is that the Pharisee probably was more pious than we are. Jesus certainly didn’t contest the Pharisee’s claims. And if you had asked any of his neighbors, they probably would have told you how helpful and kind the Pharisee was. He took the Law extremely seriously, far more than we often do. He strove hard to keep and exceed the demands of the Law just to be sure. He was probably the one that always showed up to help. He loved his wife and children and probably would have given you the shirt off his back. And certainly it is good to give God thanks when we have been kept from sin.

But those are things we should do. When we do what is commanded that isn’t something we should take pride in or boast about, either before men or before God. You don’t get a reward because you obeyed the speed limit or paid your taxes. Those are obligations laid upon you. In the same way, the Ten Commandments are not optional suggestions or favors that God has asked of you. They are

divinely instituted obligations. You are to be holy as the Lord your God is holy who made you and who shed His Blood for you that you might bear His Name as His Baptized child. If we ever actually did any of the commandments as we ought, there is nothing more we could rightly say than “I am an unworthy servant; I have only done my duty.”

That’s the reason our flesh hates the Law. There is no choice to be had. We aren’t free to choose whether or not love God and our neighbor. We aren’t even free to choose HOW we are going to love God and our neighbor. The Law says “Do this” and that is exactly what we must do...nothing less and nothing other. And it must be done gladly and without even a thought about reward. It is to be done simply because we fear, love, and trust God above all things and desire nothing more than to do His will.

Like the Pharisee, we are quick to notice when others don’t meet this expectation. And we are equally as quick to hold them in contempt and puff out our own chest because we don’t do the disgusting and irresponsible things they do. If that weren’t true there wouldn’t be long-running “reality” shows about people getting divorced. People wouldn’t be able to gain fame and wealth by being promiscuous, leaking nude pictures of themselves, getting pregnant outside of wedlock, and treating women as nothing more than objects for their own pleasure. By watching these things we give our tacit approval. And we try to assuage our own guilty consciences because someone else is obviously worse than we are. We gossip about them and revel in their depravity.

How shiny our petty good works become in comparison! We deserve a parade and heaven should sound its trumpets! Look at what we’ve done! We may have our problems, but those folks are terrible. Thank God I’m better than that! But when we try to stand on our laurels, when we try to comfort ourselves by the good we do and the evil we don’t, all we are doing, with the Pharisee, is trying to prove to God just how much we don’t need Him. And if that is our goal, then He will oblige us and show us in eternity what a life without His grace and forgiveness is. He will give us every ounce of the reward that our works have earned us - everlasting damnation.

Repent. There is only way to salvation for you and for your neighbor - the grace of God. Nothing but the mercy which sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you..and for your neighbor. There is no room for boasting before the cross of Jesus - not for you and not for anyone else. When we seek to gain God’s favor and approval by even appearing to be more holy and righteous than other sinners, we

deny God's grace, we deny our own need for mercy and forgiveness. Our contempt for others, our haughty eyes - these are nothing less than contempt for Christ our Lord who came in weakness and humility for the express purpose of seeking out sinners - tax collectors, prostitutes, murderers, blasphemers - in order to save them, in order to lift them up out of death and give them life. Unless you will number yourselves among the thieves and murderers and adulterers, the abortionists, the terrorists, the crooked politicians, and all other sinners then you will not be numbered among the redeemed. The benefits of Jesus' cross are enjoyed by repentant tax collectors, not the unrepentant and self-righteous, who work so hard to prove how much they don't need it.

You don't need your works to save you. They can't. You need only the work of Jesus for you. You need the perfectly righteous and pious Jesus who actually did keep the Law, who wasn't like any of us insofar as He actually did keep the Law, but willingly made Himself like us in every other way - taking our sinful human fleshing, enduring temptation and suffering and even death. He had every right to look on you with deep contempt but instead He looked upon you with compassion and reached out to save you, to be merciful to you and spare you from what you and every other sinner deserves - an eternity tasting the bitter wrath of God against your wretchedness. He wasn't like other men, but He willingly made Himself like other men to redeem them and make us like Him.

Why is the wretched tax collector justified? Because he didn't make excuses and try to hid his sin. He readily confessed that what the Pharisee said about him was true. But even more than that. He believed God. He believed that God would be, wanted to be, merciful to him. He believed the Law's accusations and he believed that God would fulfill His promise and atone for his sins through the blood of the Messiah. He believed Moses and the Prophets. He believed that the house of God was, as God intended it, a house of mercy. He believed that God's Messiah would shed His blood for him and make satisfaction for his guilt.

God's Messiah has shed his blood for you. Your sins have been atoned for. Do not trust in your works. Confess them because they are nothing but sin, even the best of them. There's no use in trying to pretend otherwise. God freely justifies sinners out of His mercy. Like the tax collector, trust in the works of God. Trust in the water and word of Baptism which have the promise of God to wash away your sins. Don't try to give something God. Receive what He gives to you - the Body and Blood of sacrifice that have atoned for you.

Praise be to God who has provided you this temple, this house of atonement where the Lord Jesus is present, not to receive things from you, but to give you life and salvation. And nothing pleases your Lord more than to hear sinners confess and ask for the very thing He loves to give more than anything else - the free gift of salvation. Let us take confidence in nothing and boast in nothing but this - the mercy of God for sinners which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. And let us set aside our contempt for the fallen and rather gladly take our place among them as those for whom the Son of God died that together we may be justified.

In the Name of +Jesus.