

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
28 August, Anno Domini 2022
St. Luke 18:9-14

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear saints of God,

Think about how much energy and effort you pour into making people think well of you. You want everyone to think of you as kind, loving, honest, hardworking, fair. Whenever our character is called into question you are hurt and maybe angry if you feel it was unjustified. You get defensive. You seek to justify or explain why your actions or inactions or words were good or necessary or at least understandable. And you are always on the hunt for improvement. You want to get better at x, y, or z because you imagine that if you do, then everything will be okay, then life will be okay.

And maybe you can clean up the veneer. Maybe you can start making better choices. Maybe you can create better habits. And doesn't it feel good when you do? We certainly are proud of ourselves and others when they've reached an education or exercise goal. It brings a tremendous amount of joy when someone reaches a sobriety milestone, when they can actually be weaned off their anti-depressants, when they are able to rise to the occasion at work under grueling circumstances.

The dark side of this is that, built into our nature, is the notion that only such people who are able to accomplish such things and make such progress are acceptable to God and to men. Whether judging ourselves or our children or our neighbor there is a terrible temptation to take pride in rising above others, in resisting certain temptations that some one else wages a daily war against, in not suffering particular struggles. It becomes a goal to not be like other men. And, inevitably, what follows is a judgment of those other men - struggling, weak, addicted, unhealthy, uncool, poor, unsuccessful.

And, to make matters worse, we imagine that God is the same way - pleased with us only insofar as we are improving, whether that be morally, emotionally, mentally, financially, or physically. We might have been a little put off by the Pharisee's prayer, but the truth is that we have all prayed it. We've all thanked God for some imagined superiority over and against others as though that is the measure God is using. We've all tried to separate the sheep from the goats before it's time. We have all given sideways glances if not with our eyes, most certainly with our hearts, in the

direction of those who don't seem to have it together in some way that we have convinced ourselves that we do. We've thrown people under the bus because they didn't live up to our expectations and thus we have withdrawn ourselves from them. We put ungodly expectations on people that we imagine we have attained. Why? Because we pride ourselves on supposedly attaining them. We imagine that it proves there is something good in us. We imagine that we are more acceptable to God than someone else because of what we've done or not done, because we've done a better job of keeping either God's Law or man's law than the other guy.

Repent. Whether or not you have actually done what you want others to believe you've done or accomplished or are, none of that matters. It didn't matter if the Pharisee's list was true. He still walked away condemned. The Law, your works, don't mean a hill of beans to God when it comes to being justified. No matter how wonderful your work appears or how much good it accomplishes, it cannot save you and it doesn't make God any more pleased with you. In fact, if we rely at all on our works to garner God's favor, God hates them because they take His rightful place as our God and our Savior.

We are fools if we think that we can claim any kind of moral superiority over a single other human being. "No one is good. No, not one," declares the Lord. The Pharisee's problem was that he had convinced himself that he was good. "See all the good things I do, O God? Aren't I good?" His prayer was, in essence, an attempt to prove to God and to himself that he didn't need God. He was already good. And because he was good God should therefore love him.

But he hated God, the true God anyway. He didn't take God's Law seriously, because he deluded himself into thinking he had satisfied it. But how could he? How could he have claimed to have loved God when he was quite happy to throw his tax collector neighbor under the bus and condemn him to eternal judgment? The Pharisee knew nothing of mercy. He hated mercy. He liked works - the shiny, outward ones that get the most attention but are the easiest to do. Those he could measure. Those he could change. But what he couldn't change was his heart. He had Cain's heart - filled with arrogance and selfishness and hatred. It is the heart we have when we trust in ourselves and treat others with contempt.

But God isn't so simple-minded. The fig leaves of our works simply cannot cover the ugly, sinful heart that lies beneath which the Pharisee was either completely blind to or couldn't bring himself to confess. Why would God love him then? If not because he was trying and doing such wonderful works, above and beyond what God had commanded, then what?

God doesn't love you because you do good. Good thing, because you don't, not like you should. God doesn't love you because you try hard. You can't try hard enough. You can strive your whole life to be as good as you possibly can and you still won't have even made a beginning of your salvation let alone accomplished it. God doesn't love you because of you at all. And that is the wonderful, freeing truth! God's love for you isn't based at all, even in the slightest way, upon you. His divine and perfect love is the essence of His character, a character which is never changing, never deceitful, and relentlessly merciful. Abel's sacrifice and the tax collector's prayer were pleasing to God because they were rooted in faith. Now, not the faith that simply believes God exists. Rather, the faith that believes God when He says that there is nothing in our heart but evil continually. Both men knew they had nothing worthy to offer God. Neither man came trying to offer God some worthy gift. They came seeking gifts from God, gifts which God our Father is eager and delighted to give to sinners - forgiveness and mercy.

You don't need to work yourself into a frenzy trying to please God so that He will think well of you. You are a sinner. Your flesh and heart and mind are filled with evil desires that are contrary to God's Word. As St. Paul writes in Ephesians two sinners are dead - dead in sin and trespasses. Trying to earn God's favor only proves that point further. It proves how blind we are to the true depth of our sin.

The proper way to come before God is as a beggar - offering nothing and desiring everything because God has promised to give it. There is a reason that the mercy seat was the focal point of the temple. God desires that sinners come seeking His mercy. He doesn't desire their death. And now, the great depth of God's mercy has been revealed in its fullness, now the mercy seat has reached its fulfillment. For God Himself, in the person of His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, has sacrificed Himself for you. You did nothing to deserve that. There's nothing you could do that would earn such a priceless treasure. And God would have you receive this forgiveness as a completely free gift, given of His love for you. For this reason, the Divine Service is the focal point of our lives in Christ because here, veiled under bread and wine, the Lord Jesus Christ, the true and eternal seat of God's mercy, is present in His Flesh and Blood to soothe and nourish your bruised and wearied conscience.

Believe God when He tells you that you are a sinner then believe Him when He tells you that He has taken your sins and laid them on His Son and through Him made full atonement for you. Believe Him when He says that Baptism has washed you and cleansed you of your guilt. That is the Gospel. That is the true and saving Christian faith.

What then of works? Are we to do them? Yes, of course. Faith will do them. It can't do otherwise. When our conscience is set free from the vain and hopeless notion that we can or must earn God's love, it will burst forth in love toward God and love toward our neighbor. It will see those who, like it, are filled with weakness and sin, and reach out in mercy in compassion. It won't be able to help itself and it won't seek credit or reward. These are the good works which God your Father has prepared for you and will accomplish in you by the working of the Holy Spirit. He will work on your heart and your will so that you begin to desire to walk according to the Ten Commandments. It will be a daily struggle as your flesh resists and fights back seeking glory for itself. Like the tax-collector, the Christian is acutely aware of his own weakness. But rather than despairing over it, that weakness drives the Christian to Christ who is the fount and source of God's mercy and the Holy Spirit who then strengthens to walk in love.

Rather than seeking to be unlike everyone else, rejoice that you are exactly like other men, desperately in need of a Savior. And then give thanks to God because that is precisely who He is - the Savior of sinners. And He is here among you this day to have mercy upon you, to send you home justified.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.