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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749

Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
October 27, 2013
23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons:; Deuteronomy 10:12-22 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Hymns: 236; 382; 373:1-4; 800

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Luke 18:9-14

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God!

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, dear fellow Redeemed.

INTRO: Understanding Parables

Jesus used parable extensively in His teaching ministry. He used them to help people both grasp and remember spiritual concepts that may have been new to them, or principles that ran contrary to what they had been taught, or what natural reason would suggest. It is important that the point of the parable stay in the forefront and that details of the parable are not abused to teach something foreign to the parable.

The parable before us this morning is one that is very familiar, *The Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple*. The point of the parable is one that is very important and one that certainly remains applicable to us today. In fact, as society attempts to disregard differences in religions and propose that all the religious ideas of the world are equally legitimate ways for people to come to God, it is all the more important for us to remember. This idea has taken hold in much of visible Christianity. We need to understand that there is only one approach to God that is legitimate, and we better be sure to have a good grasp of that approach if we desire to have eternal life.

THEME: In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican Jesus Presents Two Very Different Approaches to God.

Jesus begins the parable with the Pharisee. We are conditioned from our Sunday school lessons to think of the Pharisees as the “bad guys.” We understand that they were very critical of Jesus, and rejected His teachings, and they were quite jealous of the attention which Jesus was getting from the people. Ultimately they plotted against Him, and desired His death.

We need to remember that the Pharisees were not seen that way at all by the Jewish people. They were among the most highly respected members of Jewish society. They were good and upright in the eyes of the people. They were very active in the practice of their religion. And they encouraged the people to live lives that were in accord with the law of God. They went to great lengths to examine different aspects of life in Jewish society to make sure the different activities of life conformed with any and all aspects of Jewish ceremonial law. They were easily spotted by their clothes and religious clothing accessories, and were highly honored and addressed with respect by the people.

With that in mind Jesus presented this parable and --

1. **The Merit Approach of the Pharisee.**

Luke 1:11-12 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’

When the Pharisee in the parable approached God in prayer, his prayer was about himself and how he saw himself. He was very confident that he was a good and upright man. He made an adamant point of the fact that he was NOT like other men. He had taken steps to make sure that he was not guilty of those sins that are so common in society. He did not extort money from others with unfair business practices, or other kinds of pressure. He was not unjust in his manner of life. He was not unfaithful to his wife. We can see that the Pharisee was taking a fairly literal inventory of the demands of the law and saw no problem in his life! He strongly identified with the good deeds that were evident in his life; they defined him. He was a just man, not at all like the tax collector he saw hiding back in the shadows of the temple.

We are quick to condemn this self-righteous attitude and are thankful that we are not like that! And just as quick as we are to thank God that we are not like that Pharisee we are demonstrating that by nature we **are** like that Pharisee. We are quick to compare ourselves with others just as he did, and see how bad those other people are compared to us. We are thankful that we are not like them. We are thankful that we are good people. We’re not completely off base when we also see that the things that we do define who we are, as long as people recall only the good things that we do. Isn’t that society’s definition of being a good Christian?

You know, just how much we are like the Pharisee can be judged by our answer to the question, “What will you say when you stand before God on the last day and God asks you why should I allow you into my heaven? There is and there surely remains a voice within us that would prompt us to answer, “Because I have tried hard to live a good life and please God. I have always tried to treat

other people the way I would like to be treated by them. I have not done anything to atrocious like armed robbery, or drug dealing, or murder.” We are apt to take a limited literal inventory of the Ten Commandments, and claim a fair observance of them in our lives.

That is the merit approach to coming to God, and it is one with which we are personally familiar, like it or not. And by the way, by nature we like it. We may even be inclined to mention that we are faithful in church attendance and give more in our offerings than most people! We can sound just like the Pharisee bragging about fasting twice a week instead of only once a year.

Well let’s pause for a moment to consider the other approach which Jesus presents in this parable. And yes, it is important for us to understand completely and thoroughly that there are two and only two approaches for coming to God. Any mixture of the two eliminates the second, and brings it back to the first, to the merit approach.

So Jesus continued by presenting --

II. The Mercy Approach of the Publican.

I use the label “publican,” because that is what many of grew up with as the title for this parable. The second individual was a tax collector. It may be easy for people of any age and any society to have a grudge against tax collectors or property tax assessors, however the people of the Jews had very special cause for their complaint against them. This man was a Jew working for the Romans, the people that oppressed them as conquerors. Not only that, the tax collectors were given a great deal of latitude in the conduct of their business by the Romans. As long as they delivered the required revenue there would be no questions asked about any surplus that lined the pockets of the tax collector. They had the power of Rome backing up their demands for money, and they were not afraid to abuse that power. Without doubt they were seen by people and society as being despicable. In fact tax collectors were so loathsome that beggars refused to accept alms from them. Surely God would want nothing to do them!

But consider the tax collector in the parable, and his manner of approaching God in prayer.

Luke 18: 13 “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”

Even his body language is different. He didn’t look up to God with outstretched arms. He cast his eyes down in shame. He beat upon his breast as down on mourning. Without doubt he saw his deeds as defining who he was. **He was the sinner!** The evil that he had done weighed upon his heart and mind. He rightly had a guilty conscience that told him that he had no right to approach God on the basis of deeds that he had done. **He addressed God asking for mercy.** He needed God’s mercy. He needed God’s forgiving grace. Only on the basis of that **grace** could he find peace with God, or have any kind of true and loving relationship with God.

When we look into the mirror of God’s law isn’t that what we also see? We are not to look at others in this world and take an inventory of their sins and see the blemishes on their souls. No, we are to look into the law of the Lord and see the failures in our own lives. We are to see how miserably we have failed to truly love our neighbor as ourselves, and to serve God with our whole heart with all our strength and with all our mind! Each and every day we demonstrate that we love ourselves as we seek to please ourselves, and live as we see is right and pleasing and “fulfilling” for us. Our sins define us correctly. We are wretched sinners. When we come to a true evaluation of our character we are miserable.

Where can we find relief except from a righteous and holy God? And yet how dare we approach God in our wretched state? It is only because of the mercies of God revealed in Jesus Christ that we come before the Lord. On the basis of Jesus merits we come before the Lord with the prayer of the despicable tax collector, **“God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”**

How can that work? Let us consider --

III. Jesus’ Approach Evaluation.

Luke 18: 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus lays it out in shocking terms for His audience. **The tax collector was the one who was justified!** The tax collector, that snake in the grass, that betrayer of the Jewish society, the one who cooperated with the enemy, **he was justified!** Yes, and it goes back to the humble approach he had with the Lord. He saw his sin. He saw his own guilt and shame. He confessed his sin before the Lord.

The Pharisee did none of that. The Pharisee saw the good that he had done as being sufficient cause for God to favor him with blessings and eternal life. He was not willing to admit that his sinful shortcomings disqualified him for eternal life. He saw the condemnation of the law when Scripture said, “The soul that sins shall die,” as being a condemnation of others, and not something that applied to himself and his life. He exalted himself before the Lord. Jesus says, that just doesn’t work.

When we understand that we are to be holy even as the Lord our God is holy, then we see how far short we fall of the glory of God. When people violate the law of the land, we hold them accountable. The bank robber doesn’t get a free pass because he was kind to the little old lady that lived next door. He still has to stand before the bar of justice for the crimes that he has done. The world remembers and characterizes the bank robber as the criminal he is! And yet for some reason we think God shall not see the many sins and transgressions of our lives as being anything more than little peccadillos that shouldn’t get any attention, much less judgment from the Lord. **We exalt ourselves before the Lord** if we think that our kindnesses outweigh our shortcomings, which are sins, but we don’t like using the word sin when it is something in our own lives.

Jesus is clear: the one and only approach for coming to God is to humble ourselves before the Lord and throw ourselves at His mercy for Jesus’ sake. Jesus willingly bore our sins in His own body on the tree. He endured the curse of God. Jesus is the One, the only One, who accumulated merit that can be counted in our favor before God. **It is by the mercies of God that we are not condemned.** Come to God in Christ Jesus. Ask for His mercy, and you may leave here with the Lord’s blessing, **justified**, declared fully and completely free of all guilt. Your sins have been removed.

Through faith in Christ you are righteous and holy before the Lord.
God says: “**Go in peace!**”

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep
your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.