

Grace to You and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 18:9-14: (Please Rise:) Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple courts to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.'

¹³ "However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

¹⁴ "I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

We Pray: Heavenly Father, Give us humble hearts that always rejoice to hear of the forgiveness you give to us sinful people! Be with us today. Strengthen our faith as we study Your Word. We pray this all in Jesus' name. AMEN. (Be Seated)

For total transparency – I confess: in the last 2 years, I have preached from this text three times! (– and today make it an even four!) So why are we looking at it again?! Aren't there other sections of Scripture worth looking at? ...True. But there is also great value in returning repeatedly to a familiar section like this. Does a farmer ever go out to one of his fields and say: "This field, again?! How boring and awful! I've been seeing this same 40 acres for the last 30 years! I'm tired of it!" I've never met a farmer like that! Instead, the farmers I know appreciate and love the field that produces fruit for him and provides for his livelihood after he puts some work and effort into it each year! It would be silly to complain about the same old field – if it was producing! And the same thing goes for these familiar sections of the Bible that the Holy Spirit continues to work and produce through!

In these familiar Bible lessons, we have opportunities to see details we hadn't noticed before; we are refreshed by taking *unchanging* truths and applying them to our *constantly changing* situations and lives. And so there are benefits – as I trust you will find – as we again work through the familiar parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Today we focus on what God's desire and hope is for those who approach Him in His house. Looking at **Two Churchgoers**, we see **The Right and Wrong Way of Approaching God**.

1. The Pharisee.

So what about this first individual that goes to church? – and how do we relate to him – the Pharisee?

We already understand a great deal about this man by the label that Jesus gives to him: A Pharisee. Pharisees were devout people. They were dedicated to their faith and to living it out! They desired to be pious – that is: holy, saintly, righteous before God. And there is nothing wrong with these things! God's people should be pious! This is a good thing.

But the problem was that the Pharisees' concept of piety – of what they thought it *took* to be holy and righteous – ended up being different from God's concept of piety – of what God has said *it takes* to be holy and righteous. Pharisees would strive so hard in their piety that they ended up blinding themselves so they would not see the troubling spiritual condition that they were actually in.

They built up additional rules and regulations around the Commandments, thinking that by doing so, they wouldn't break the actual commandments. *"We can't do any work on the Sabbath day?! Well then let's limit ourselves to 3000 steps and not carry anything larger than a half a dried fig!"* ...Their intentions weren't bad, but by doing this they ended up fooling themselves!

With their own good works – by keeping up the appearance of piety many were trying to give those around them the message that they were righteous and holy – without sin. But really all this was doing, was plastering over and hiding the ugly reality that they too were among those **"who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God!"** (Romans 6:23) God sees through the external appearances – He can see through outward piety – no matter how thick it's been laid on! He can see to the heart and core of every person. And there He finds *in everyone* a sick, deadly condition that all people have: we are sinful! Sadly, the Pharisees were not only fooling others by their good appearances of holiness and righteousness – they were fooling themselves: **"Trusting in themselves – that they were righteous – they looked down on others."**

The Pharisee in our text was all about righteous appearances! Certainly a familiar face, seen often in the middle of the temple, he is described with his hands up with his chest puffed out. He was there to communicate with God, Yes! For the purpose of glorification, Yes! But not for *God's glory*. This man was there to glorify and praise himself – evidenced in his pathetic prayer: *"I thank you God that I'm so great a person! That I do so much! I'm a person that You must be very happy to have on Your side! Clearly, I'm great – especially when you compare me with this man over here!"*

So what was the result of this man's attendance at church? What did He receive as he prayed that day in God's house? ...Nothing. He received no blessing out of it. And what blessing *could* he possibly receive? He wasn't interested in receiving anything. Instead he was working to exalt himself. And what does God think of those who come to His house trying to show Him how good, great, and holy they have been on our own?! Isaiah explained (Is. 64:6): such **"Righteous acts are like filthy rags"** – as if you are coming before God covered in some disgusting biohazard! This kind of attitude, found in the Pharisee, literally grosses God out! He can't stand it! He is unwilling to exalt such a person who tries to exalt himself. The result for this man, as Jesus explains, was that he did NOT go home justified before God. He was instead deceiving himself, claiming to be without sin (1 Jn 1:8), and by doing so, he was rejecting the help that God desires to give!

How do we relate to this Pharisee? First of all, this is a warning of the Law that applies to everyone! If, in your heart, you start thinking about how pious, righteous, and good you are, WATCH OUT! Are you starting to trust in yourself and in your own righteousness? Are you exalting yourself?

We fall into such a trap especially when we start comparing ourselves to others in our church—or when we start thinking we are better than others! When we start making a comparison by saying or thinking: *“Oh look who finally showed up to church this week!”* or *“Well at least MY family and kids are better behaved than them!”* or *“Oh, I see that so and so didn’t put any offering in the plate!”* or *“Why is this person here?! Everyone knows what they did!”*

For us as Christians, this is a real temptation—to compare ourselves with others. In fact, we might even be tempted right now to be thinking: *“At least I’m not like that unwelcoming, unloving, dirty rotten, self-exalting Pharisee!”* Aha! Even there we are sinning! Comparing ourselves to another. Such comparisons are NOT for us to make—this looking down the nose at others, regardless of who they are, is the kind of judging that Jesus condemns. We can’t think we are better than any other person—especially a fellow churchgoer—someone else who has come to the house of the Lord!

2. The Tax Collector

Regardless of who that other person is or what they have done, they ARE IN THE RIGHT PLACE! This is exactly where broken, hurting sinners need to be! This is a place where God desires to help people who are in need! In fact this is the primary reason why we have church—why we are gathering together! And this should be the primary reason why YOU are here!—Because YOU need God’s help. This is **“of first importance:”** to receive the help that God desires to give—that He has already won and makes available for EVERYONE through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

I can’t imagine anyone going into a doctor’s office and telling their doctor what an excellent patient they are—that he should be glad to have such a great and healthy person under their care—and to brag to him about not having any illnesses! NO! We go to the doctor to find out HIS opinion about our health and to seek HIS advice and receive HIS treatment in order to be healthy! Similarly, we come to church, NOT with an attitude like the Pharisee, telling God about how good we are, but instead, we come to God’s house with hearts like that of the Tax Collector.

This man had failed to be outwardly pious. He had a reputation of being a traitorous crook. He came to God’s house recognizing this reputation was earned and deserved. He wasn’t interested in making comparisons; it was clear to him that he was in total trouble—in his mind, nothing could compare to his sins! Off in the corner, bowed over, thumping his chest—he saw how regrettable his actions had been, he was sorrowful because he knew his guilt. This broken individual recognized he had only one hope—as he approached God with a prayer that pleases God and glorifies Him: **“Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”**

This Tax Collector recognized how hopeless he was on his own and so he turned to God—to the God who has proclaimed: **“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live!”** (Ezek. 33:11) He turned to the God who promises to help by providing salvation—the God **“Who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him, should not perish but have eternal life!”** (John 3:16)

The Tax Collector came before God in faith—asking God to help him, a sinful, broken, person. And with that humble heart and attitude that sought God’s help, the Tax Collector

ironically ended up as the pious one. It was the Tax Collector that was righteous, holy – forgiven in God’s eyes. As Jesus explained, **“This man, the Tax Collector, went home justified rather than the other.”** By humbly coming before God, confessing his sinfulness, requesting God’s mercy – he received it! He was declared before God to be righteous and holy – forgiven of those terrible sins he had committed; while the other man remained in His sins – refusing to admit his need for help!

In the same way do WE COME HERE to God’s House – again and again, repeatedly – not trusting in our own righteousness; not looking down on others; not exalting ourselves or what we do. We instead approach God understanding that WE need His help – and WE rejoice to know that HERE, He gives us that help!

Here, in this place, God Justifies those who seek His mercy. He declares us righteous through His Son Jesus Christ! Jesus, who didn’t exalt Himself, but came to us in humility, in order to help us, lived for us a perfect life of piety and righteousness. No one else has ever been righteous in themselves, except for Christ! But here in this place, God delivers that righteousness to you, so it counts as your own – covering you from head to toe! Jesus also was willing to suffer the ultimate humility as He went to the cross. He suffered the greatest injustice the universe has ever seen when His life was sacrificed – His blood shed to pay for the sins of all people of all time. And here in this place, God delivers that forgiveness that Jesus won to you when you approach Him praying: **“Lord be merciful to ME! A sinner!”** And then no longer in humility but instead in power and glory, we witness our Lord Jesus’ victory over sin in His glorious resurrection from the dead. Here in this place, God approaches us and points us to the open and empty tomb in order to reassure us that He HAS been merciful! He proclaims words of peace and forgiveness as we hear the absolution spoken to us personally HERE, when we receive His Word and Sacraments!

Do not ever get tired of receiving this! God’s mercy is never old or stale – it should always be welcomed by our hearts! This is why we come to hear the repeated message that God delivers to us in His Means of Grace. It’s why our church service and liturgy is designed the way it is – to point us continually to God’s mercy and grace. As we hear His Word; as we are baptized (and recall those waters of regeneration every day); as we regularly gather around His Altar to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we then get to depart in peace, knowing that God has helped us! We can rest assured that we are going home Justified! Declared righteous – as God’s own people – citizens of heaven! What an awesome blessing God bestows upon those who approach him humbly! He exalts us!

So how should we approach God? As those who have faith in Him, who is willing and happy to have mercy upon those who approach Him – who put their hope in His help! **All glory be to Him! Amen.**

(Please Rise!) The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard and keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

I now invite you to turn to page 4 of your bulletins – we turn to God seeking His mercy...