

Pentecost 22 (Proper 25) C2010
Genesis 4:1-15
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-17

As I have mentioned before, when you are reading or hearing a Bible passage and thinking about how it applies to you, one of the things to do is to figure out where you fit in to the story. Ask yourself, “Who am I in this particular portion of Scripture? Which character represents me, my thoughts, my actions?” Well, in today’s Gospel reading, you’ve got two choices. Either you’re the Pharisee or you’re the tax collector. Either you’re the self-righteous puritan or you’re the thieving, unclean sinner. Not much of a choice is it? But those are your options. And there’s no middle ground. Who are you?

“Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” “Well,” you may say, “that’s certainly not talking about me. I know I’m not righteous. Nobody’s perfect.” However, don’t be so quick to dismiss what Jesus says. Sure, I don’t think there’s anyone here who would stand up and say that they’re perfect and righteous. We’ve all made mistakes; we all have our flaws. But on the other hand, do you ever think that the flaws you do have aren’t all that serious? I’m sure we’ve all got pretty good rationalizations for our mistakes. How many of you really think that your eternal life is in jeopardy because of who you are and what you’ve done?

You see, most people think, “Sure, I’m not without sin, but all in all I’d say I’ve lived a decent life. There’s more good than bad in me, and certainly that counts for something with God. I try my hardest to do what’s right, and when I mess up, God’s not going to send me to hell for that, is he? I mean, come on, I go to church. I give offerings. I volunteer. Compared to a lot of others in this society, I think I’m doing OK. There are a lot worse people than me out there. I thank God that I’m not like them. I do my best to live a good life, and I think in the end God will reward me for that.” Does that sound a little more familiar? That’s how the modern day Pharisee talks. If that is how you are tempted to think or talk, God help you and grant you repentance.

The Pharisee’s problem was not that he sought to live an outwardly righteous life. Would that all of us would be more pious and zealous in doing what is good and right. Would that all of us would give a full 10% tithe in our offerings each week rather than financial leftovers. No, the Pharisee’s problem was inward and in the heart; he trusted in himself and in his own deeds to put him right with God. He didn’t place His confidence in what God had done for him but what he had done for God. The focus of his religion was not the Lord but himself. His worship was not really about God, but himself. It was all about who he was and what he thought was important, instead of being about the Lord and His Word.

And you can see that in the way the Pharisee prays. Five times in this short prayer he uses the word “I.” *“I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”* In fact, where our translation says the Pharisee “prayed thus” it could be translated that the Pharisee prayed “with himself,” almost as if God was the bystander and he was the main event. Beware of prayers and worship in which God is simply there as a prop and window dressing while the focus is really on

those doing the praying and the worshipping. In the end that is self-worship and self-righteousness.

True worship is about us receiving what our holy Triune God wants to give us, not about us devising our own ways and forms of worship. That was the problem with Cain's offering in the Old Testament reading. He gave his offering, thinking God should be impressed with him, whereas Abel gave his offering out of thankfulness for the forgiveness and mercy he received from his merciful Lord. Like the Pharisee and the tax collector, Cain and Abel believed in two whole different religions. The Pharisee and Cain believe that God should be impressed with them and their own self-centered worship. The tax collector and Abel believed that they were nothing in and of themselves, but relied instead on God's mercy toward sinners. And just like the Pharisee despised the tax collector, Cain despised Abel even to the point of killing him, just because God had accepted Abel. And so false worshipers of God always despise and persecute the true worshipers.

God gave His good and wise Law not so that you may justify yourself but so that you may see how much you need His help and deliverance. The Law is there not so that you can see how good you're doing compared to others. It is there so that you can see how you're doing compared with the holy God and what He requires. The purpose of the Law is not only to show you how you must live but also to expose how greatly you have fallen short of its demands.

When all is said and done, the Pharisee and the tax collector are in the exact same condition. Though one looks good and impressive and the other doesn't, both share the same heart disease called sin. Both of them are foul and unclean within. The tax collector is showing symptoms of his sin-disease, whereas the Pharisee seems to have his mostly under control. But both have the same root disorder; both are just a heartbeat away from death, as the Bible says, "*You were dead in trespasses and sins.*"

Let me ask you: Who's in the better position, the man about to go in for heart surgery or the one unaware that he has the same condition—who's about to keel over dead? Who's in the better position before God, the Pharisee who falsely thinks that everything's fine with himself, or the tax collector who understands the true diagnosis? Learn from the Pharisee and the tax collector. Believe the terminal diagnosis that the Law has made about you. Humble yourself before God in true repentance; seek His healing, His cleansing, His righteousness, for you and I have no righteousness of our own.

As Psalm 51 says, "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise.*" The Lord certainly did not despise the tax collector as the Pharisee did. For the tax collector comes not in pride but in lowly penitence and faith. This is not fake humility or going through the motions. The tax collector stands afar off from those praying in the temple; because he knows how his sin cuts him off from God and others. He does not raise his eyes to heaven; for he knows he deserves no heavenly blessing. He beats his chest when he prays as a symbol that he is worthy to be punished severely. He cries out his only hope, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"

The tax collector places his confidence and trust not in anything about himself but entirely in the Lord and His mercy. He despairs of his own merits and character and entrusts himself completely to the merits and character of God. He relies not on his own sacrifice but on God's sacrifice. When the tax collector prays for mercy, he uses a word that has to do with the offering

up of the animals there in the temple. He desires the atonement for sin that only God can provide through the shedding of blood. Remember, it was at these times of public prayer in the temple when an animal would be sacrificed on the altar according to God's command to cover the sins of the people. Therefore, at the very moment in which the tax collector prays, "*God be merciful to me a sinner!*" his prayer was being answered there in the sacrifice which the Lord provided. Also remember that Abel's sacrifice in the OT reading required the shedding of blood and Cain's offering did not. The Scriptures say there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. Abel and the tax collector trusted in the Lord's sacrificial mercy, and they yearned for the day when the Messiah would come and bring all these things to their fulfillment.

The Pharisee thought he was righteous, but he is not the one who is justified before God. No, it is the tax collector who goes down to his house justified, declared righteous in God's sight. And so it is also for each of you who pray in humility and penitent faith, "*God be merciful to me a sinner!*" For the sacrifice has also been made for you, not on the altar of the temple, but on the altar of the cross. There Christ, the Lamb of God, the firstborn, was offered up once and for all. By His shed blood your sins have been fully atoned for, and you have been put right with God. As it is written in the Scriptures, "*You who once were far off (as the tax collector stood far off) have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*" You are justified before God, declared righteous in His sight through Christ. "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*" It's all yours because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a gift that is given to you; you receive it just as the little children who are brought to Jesus receive the kingdom of heaven as a gift.

I began this sermon by pointing out how, in applying a Bible passage to yourself, it's good to find where you are in the story. But even more so, it is important to find where Jesus is in the story for you. In today's OT, Jesus is there in the sacrificed firstborn of Abel's flock, and in Abel's own unrighteous death. In the Gospel He is there in temple, the place of God's holy presence; He is there in the sacrifices, which foreshadowed His own sacrifice. And Jesus is also there in the tax collector, who humbled himself and was exalted in the end. For it is written in the Scriptures that the Son of God humbled Himself even to the point of death on the cross, in our place and for our sins. Therefore, God the Father has highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

You will go down to your house justified today not because of what you have done for God, but because of what He has done for you. He humbled Himself even to the point of death, so that you might be exalted with Him to His life. He baptized you and in the water you received the kingdom of God and there He turned you from a child of wrath to a child of grace. He comforts you now with His words of mercy and feeds you His own true body and blood, like a holy medicine, like a powerful chemotherapy, to cure your sin-disease and to prepare your bodies for the resurrection to life everlasting on the Last Day. You can only receive the treatment for your sin-disease where Christ gives you His healing—the Church is the only hospital that can really help you to live forever. Brothers and sisters of Christ, we come before God as the tax collector did, humbling ourselves before Him, trusting in His mercy, that He may lift us up in due time, saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And merciful He is. Amen.