

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 11 – August 11, 2024
Luke 18:9-14 – Justified by Faith
Rev Peter Wagner

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

Cain and Abel. The Lord had regard for Abel's offering of the first fruits of his flock, but for Cain's offering he had no regard. So what was it about their offerings that made one acceptable and one unacceptable? Did Cain fail to perform the right ceremonies? Did he skimp on his offering? There's nothing in the story to indicate this. So does God prefer a animal sacrifices to grain and vegetables? Not at all. Grain and animal offerings are both prescribed in the Old Testament. So what was wrong with Cain's gift? The Book of Hebrews gives the answer. It wasn't a matter of what was offered, or the how anything was offered. It was a matter of faith and unbelief. Hebrews 11 says: "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks."

Faith is the crucial element. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We walk by faith, and not by sight. By grace you have been saved, through faith.

Abel's offering was accepted because of his faith. Faith in God's mercy, despite his sin. Even though he brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions, Abel thought nothing of his generous offering. His focus was on the coming Messiah, the offspring he knew God had promised to Eve, one to redeem the children of Adam. His hope was in the true Lamb of God who would suffer and die and pour out his blood on the earth to bring us rest from all our toil, to crush Satan's head under his triumphant feet. Only faith in Jesus Christ, true God, can rescue you from eternal death.

As for Cain, his sacrifice was rejected because of unbelief, because he put his faith in himself. He came expecting a reward for his generous gift to God. He expected God to be impressed. Therefore, for his offering God had no regard.

But how do we know Cain's faith was misplaced? Is there anything in the text that would indicate this? Certainly. The proof is in what happened next. You see Cain's unbelief in his jealousy for his brother, his anger toward God, his murder and his lying. You see his unbelief in the way he hides his guilt and tries to justify himself, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

And even when it becomes clear that God knows what he's done, Cain still does not repent. He has no desire for God's pity or forgiveness. Though his punishment is more than he can bear, Cain is too proud to ask for mercy. Instead, he blames God, he complains that his punishment is too great, that God is making him a fugitive so anyone who finds him will kill him. "God," he's saying, "I took vengeance on my brother to kill him. But now you're doing the same thing, perpetuating the cycle of violence, taking vengeance on me to kill me just as I killed Abel."

"Not so!" answers the Lord. "You are wicked, I am righteous and just. Vengeance is mine, not yours. You are the clay, I am the potter. I could put an end to you this instant, and I would do no wrong. Yet I choose to spare you, Cain, to give you time to repent." Therefore, God puts a mark on Cain, lest any who finds him should attack him. God's compassion for sinners is so great that he pities even those who hate him. He patiently gives them time to repent and return in faith.

Let us take warning from Cain, let us not deceive ourselves that we have no need of repentance. Therefore, this Sunday in the church year is like a miniature Lent, a day to return to the Lord our God with all our heart. Yet even now, he may relent from all the disaster we deserve for our unbelief and impenitence. So our hymns today are Lenten hymns, and the readings turn us away from ourselves, pointing us to God's grace and forgiveness.

How clearly the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, a parable directed at those who trust in themselves that they are righteous, how clearly this parable calls us to examine ourselves, and ask ourselves which of the two men we are. Are we the self-righteous Pharisee, who justified himself? Or are we the repentant tax collector, justified by God?

The Pharisee prayed thus, "God, 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." As much as to say, "God, look at

me, and how much I've done for you and for the church." But for all his outward righteousness, he's no better than Cain. Before the throne of God, this Pharisee remains a guilty sinner.

As for the tax collector, standing far off, he does not even lift his eyes to heaven. He beats his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Unlike Cain, he makes no effort to conceal or excuse himself. He doesn't try to hide his guilt. He throws himself on the mercy of God, knowing he deserves wrath. Yet for his faith, this man is counted righteous. "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other." Justified by faith. His verdict is Not Guilty. God sees no guilt in him. It's all God's work, God's grace, God's mercy.

"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," says the tax collector. But the English translation is so weak. In Greek, it's more like, "O God, atone for me, the sinner." Not a sinner, but the sinner. I'm the only sinner, the chief, the sinner of sinners. And do not merely have mercy on me – there's another word for mercy – the word here is far deeper. "Atone for me, redeem me," says the tax collector. "Make a payment for me. Sacrifice an offering for my sin, and sprinkle the blood on me. Nothing I offer you can earn forgiveness. You alone can do it."

What a magnificent cry of faith. Perhaps the greatest prayer of faith in all the Bible: "O God, atone for me, the sinner."

So let it be your prayer. Atone for me, O God. Redeem me. For I am the chief of sinners, and there is nothing I can offer you. Purge me with hyssop, sprinkle your blood on me, and I shall be clean.

Do not come before your God like Cain, or like the Pharisee. Do not seek to justify yourself. Come in humble repentance and faith, "I, a poor miserable sinner." Confess to God all your sins and iniquities, pleading for his mercy, for the atoning sacrifice in the blood of Jesus, to cover all your sin.

And in reply, your gracious God promises to count you righteous, to pour out his blood for your redemption. Now, in the sight of God, you are no longer sinner, but a saint. You were dead in your trespasses and sins, says Paul, you were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love for us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Not that there's no place for good works in the Christian life. Not at all. In the very next verse Paul reminds you how crucial good works are. Not to save yourself, but good works are the necessary outcome of faith. "For we are his workmanship," says Paul, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We are his workmanship. Our good works cannot save, but God is at work in us to recreate us, to redeem us, to do his good works in and through us, all to his glory alone.

Therefore, today on this little Lent, lift up your downcast eyes from the ground. Approach the altar of God, where he gives you his blood. Look to Jesus, to his cross and his sprinkled blood, blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, but the blood of God cries out for you from his throne in heaven, where the living, risen King is seated, pleading for your pardon. Jesus says, "O God, be merciful to this sinner. For he is a saint, purchased with my blood. His sin is atoned for, his guilt is taken away. Let the mark I put up on him, the mark of the cross in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the mark of baptism, let that mark of the Triune name guard him from all the vengeance he deserves. Let my mark of the cross be the seal that brings this precious child into heaven forever."

Glory be to Jesus, who in bitter pains, poured for me the lifeblood from his sacred veins.

Grace and life eternal in that blood I find; blest be his compassion, infinitely kind.

Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.

Lift we, then, our voices, swell the mighty flood; louder still and louder, praise the precious blood! Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.