

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 11 – August 20, 2023
Luke 18:9-14 – O God Be Merciful To Me
Pastor Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“O God, I give you thanks that I am not like those other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers. I go to church every Sunday. I give a tithe of all my income. I would never steal or cheat on my wife or hurt anyone. I work hard and earn my own living. I don't rely on government handouts. I take care of myself and my family. My home is neat and organized, it's not a dump like that place down the road. I live responsibly, I pay my taxes. I do my part for the community.”

“I give you thanks, O God, that I'm not like those trailer trash, those alcoholics, those couples raising kids out of wedlock, those illegals, those hoarders and slobs who trash their property, who blow their paychecks in a weekend, who waste their time playing video games, who have no direction in life. Thank you, God, for giving me good role model parents and keeping me on the straight and narrow, so I don't become like one of them.”

This is an awful prayer. But it could be the prayer of any good, upright American Christian. Because it has an element of truth. Being a good citizen really is better. A good citizen has a lot to be thankful for. It's a blessing to have parents that raised you well. And God is pleased when we obey the law and earn an honest wage. No one could condemn you for that. As for the irresponsible ones of society, their way of life really is bad. The tax collectors of this world are living in sin, they need to stop and amend their ways. They need forgiveness.

But this prayer is awful. It's the same prideful prayer of the Pharisee, filled with contempt. And Jesus condemns the Pharisees of this world, those who live an outwardly respectable life, putting on a show of piety when they only love themselves. He condemns the Pharisee's haughty attitude, his contempt for the tax collector, his boasting toward God of his own goodness. Jesus did not come for men like this. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. So the Savior says to you, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

We know that spiritually, it would be far better to be a tax collector than a Pharisee. It's better to be a sinner and repent than to imagine you're righteous and be condemned. And it's easier to know you're a sinner when your life is a mess. When your sin is obvious to everyone, you're more likely to be aware of it too. But when your sin is hidden from others, it's easy to conceal from yourself. So those who live an outwardly clean life often have a harder time coming to God in repentance. They're in greater danger of condemnation.

But ironically, the Pharisees of this world are more likely to show up in church. It's easy to go to church when your life looks clean, because that's what's expected of Christians. Christians are supposed to be good citizens. And sadly, those who know they're sinners, who know they're lazy and irresponsible, who know their lives are a mess, who are filled with distress over it, who need Jesus the most – these don't want to come. They keep away from church because they're afraid of what others will say.

Surely it was painful for that tax collector to enter the temple, knowing all eyes would be fixed on him. But he came anyway. He swallowed his pride and stood before God with eyes downcast. He beat his breast and prayed the great prayer of faith, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” And he was forgiven. He, and not the Pharisee, went down to his house justified.

The truth is that God is rich in mercy. He has mercy on all, both on the one who knows his sin, and on the one who does not. In his mercy he calls the unrepentant Pharisee to repentance, and in his mercy he forgives the despairing tax collector. For he is always more ready to hear than we to pray. And he is always more ready to give than we desire or deserve.

And like the temple of old, the church is the place where God is pleased to bestow mercy. This is where Jesus is present to forgive sinners. The whole church service is about only one thing – forgiveness. This is why we begin our service with the confession of sins, “I a poor miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You... I pray You of You boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.” That's just a long version of the tax collector's prayer, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

And God is merciful. He has atoned for the sinner. He has purchased your life by the blood of his Son, shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins. The blood of Jesus atones for all sin, for all laziness and unfaithfulness, for all irresponsible living. No sin is too great. His blood even makes payment for murderers like

Cain. His blood pays for all the innocent blood crying out from the ground from the beginning of the world. And like the mark of protection that our Lord put on Cain, the mark of the cross protects all sinners from hell. It's the mark of the Holy Trinity, put on you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit at your baptism. By the mark of the cross, your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for.

And the church service is all about applying that forgiveness to you. So in the church service, God's absolution comes right after your confession, without any delay. "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

And then the whole rest of the liturgy is about reinforcing this absolution. We repeat the prayer of the tax collector again in the Kyrie, "Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us." And we give thanks and praise God for his mercy in the Gloria, calling on the Lamb that takest away the sin of the world, to have mercy upon us. And we confess his mercy in the Creed. Our Lord Jesus Christ, for us men and for our salvation, was made man. He was crucified for us, for the remission of sins.

Then the liturgy's theme of forgiveness and mercy continues with the sermon, for the pastor is sent by God to preach the gospel of Christ crucified. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief." Then in the Lord's Supper, you receive into your sinful bodies the pure lifegiving body and blood of God's Son, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins.

Like the tax collector who came to the temple, you have also come here, to the church where Jesus has promised to be. So when you come before this altar, do not approach in boastful pride, but in humility. Confess you are a sinner, and wait on God's mercy. For he loves you and gave himself for you. You can be certain of it, because he said it himself. "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Believe it, and depart in peace, for you are justified in his blood.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. We all need him. Tax collectors and Pharisees, whoever we are. Tax collectors, stop living in sin. Swallow your pride and come to church, regardless of what others might say. Because Jesus is here, and he loves you. Come into his presence. Repent, seek his mercy, and receive his forgiveness. And Pharisees, examine your hearts to see if you are really without sin. Repent of looking on others with contempt. And come into his presence. Seek his mercy, and receive his forgiveness. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

Here in the church you truly see God's salvation in Jesus, you hear him with your ears, and you receive him on your lips. Now you can depart in peace. You can go back down to your home justified, for you have tasted the great mercy of your God.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for his mercy endures forever. Amen.

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