

Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Did that parable Jesus just told surprise anyone? Did it make your ears perk up, your eyes open wide, or make you gasp a bit? The parables Jesus told were often intended to upset the apple cart just a bit. They were crafted so as to pack a bit of a punch and open the hearer up to the radicalness that is God's kingdom Jesus was sent to usher in. Yet, given the context in which we read and hear these parables sometimes I wonder if we truly grasp that shock value as much as His original audience.

What makes it difficult is that so many of us have been taught our whole life that which Martin Luther and other reformers, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and God's Holy Word, came to understand, that is we are made right before God not by our works but solely by God's grace through the free gift of God's Son Jesus Christ. Through the gift of faith, strengthened and nurtured by the Holy Spirit through prayer, through hearing and reading of God's Word, gathered together

in worship we are strengthened and enlightened through the holy sacraments, the gospel coming to us in word and song, and solely by God's actions do we come to believe Christ alone sets us free and grants us the gift of salvation.

Yet, in some ways I think we can relate to the Pharisee. In some ways, we are that Pharisee. We are taught the necessity of prayer, the need to give back what is rightfully God's, the importance of coming to church regularly as marks of a faithful Christian. This parable Jesus tells us just does not seem fair does it? It's like the workers who show up early in the morning and put in a full days work for the master and come to find they are paid the same wage as those who show up late and only work an hour or two. So what, should we simply stop coming to church? Should we stop giving? Should we stop praying? Is Jesus indicating it makes no difference? Is it OK to be a cheat, a liar, to break laws? It is shocking isn't it? Can you imagine the crowd gathered that day when Jesus seemed to favor the tax collector over this religious leader?

Now our parable is not condoning the actions of the tax collector. Jesus is not praising him for his scrupulous ways. He is not making him out to have a heart of gold. The tax collector is a cheat. He is working

for the Roman government and charging the hard-working Israelites exuberant taxes and adding his own commission on top. He would have been hated, despised, and the least likely of people to have found favor with God. The Pharisee, on the other hand, would've been extremely popular. While Pharisees are often viewed negatively in the gospels the truth is they were devout Jews just as Jesus was. They followed God's law. In fact, this Pharisee actually does more than what is commanded. So to hear Jesus publicly criticize this man would have seemed absurd. But Jesus is not condemning his faithful worship of God. He is not condemning his actions of prayer and almsgiving. What he is condemning is the Pharisees skewed image of who God is. The Pharisees prayer seemingly implies God can be manipulated into favoring him more than others because of how good he is and all he has done. The tax collector on the other hand comes knowing he is unworthy to stand before God. He is aware of his sinful nature and desperately cries to God for mercy. His prayer acknowledges that his fate is solely in the hands of a merciful God. Only God can restore him to a right relationship with God. Only God can save him from the power of sin.

There is much good news in this parable and if we look closely Jesus gives us a picture of who God is. God does not discriminate, compare us against another based on how smart we are, how rich we are, how much more pious we are than someone else, or how much more handsome we are. No, God is a God of grace, mercy, and love. Jesus invites and welcomes all. He says that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from God and God's love. He says that all are equal in God's eyes. He says that when we think we are too broken to be fixed or too alone and sense no one else cares or find ourselves carrying too much guilt and shame and can't find any solace there is hope. There is help. There is Jesus – offering us forgiveness. Offering us life. Offering us a future. We can't buy it. We can't earn it. This grace, freely given, opens the eyes of the world, even yet today, to the reality that the in-breaking of God's kingdom is drastically different than the kingdom of the world in which we live where success, status, and privilege often have more to do with the color of your skin, gender, nationality, last names, wealth, where you live, the type of car you drive, or who you know. This parable and God's grace is still surprising – even shocking!

So what about prayer? Worship? Giving? Why do we do them?

We do them because of what God has done for us in Christ. They are our response to God's grace. We pray because God listens. We pray because our Lord commands it. We pray because "prayer helps us to discover who we are, and who God is: merciful and loving and just." (Kate Huey)

We come to worship because we are also the tax collector – desperately in need of God's forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. We come to hear those words of pardon. We come to be fed with the bread of life. We come to be washed in the waters of baptism. We come to worship in order to give thanks to God for all God has given us in Christ. We come to be fed and nurtured so that we may bear fruit. We come to encounter Christ in our neighbor and be reminded of the promise we are never alone. And then we give because God gives first. Moved by God's grace, we give in time, in talents, and monetarily so that the church on earth may continue to proclaim the Gospel and be God's hands and feet in the world.

We are all united together in Christ. We are reminded of that today and may we call come before the Lord as one, setting aside our differences and pray "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Amen.