

Sermon for Trinity 11 – Luke 18:9-14

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

What do people do when confronted with their own sin? How do people react when told to repent of the wrong they've done in life? There's some different ways that are summed up in today's Gospel. The Pharisee in today's parable embodies a couple reactions of the call to repentance such as, "... I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." It's classic, isn't it? Lord, I know that I'm a sinner, because all have sinned and fallen short of your glory, but I'm not as bad as him. I mean, let's be fair here: if his sins are worse than mine, certainly you have to dish out the punishment more severely on that grievous sinner ahead of my tiny mistakes. What was his other reaction? "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." And there's the other dandy: Look at my life; I do great things for God! How can you accuse me? Certainly some of my many good deeds will cover the few sins I've committed.

Comparing our faults to our neighbor's faults. Using our works to cover our sins. This is almost as old a religion as the Gospel itself. In Moses telling of the account of history's first two brothers, the names change (Cain and Abel/ Pharisee and tax collector) but the essential story remains the same. "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.' And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions." Perhaps Cain's prayer during his offering went something like this: "God, I thank you that I am not like Abel, bringing stinking bloody sacrifices to your altar. I bring the fruit of the ground like my father. I am the man you promised who will crush the head of the serpent." Cain stood before God, despising his brother and self-righteous in his own deeds.

We see a very different picture in the tax collector. How did he react when confronted with his sin? He examined his life and found that it was altogether wicked and vain. His actions were unprofitable and his words and thoughts even more so. His whole life was unholy and wicked with nothing good to find. Even if he could find a work that was apparently good, it would be tainted with original sin and his own corrupt nature. His righteousness is only unrighteousness when compared with God's. Do we look at ourselves in this way? Herein lays true repentance. And there can be no other way to stand before God which leads to salvation other than repentance.

Works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works. No one can be justified before God by good works; no one can be good and pleasing to God by them. First, one must be pleasing to God, and only then one can do good and God-pleasing works. We see this in the Pharisee: he was not a thief or dishonest, or adulterous; he fasted, tithed, and probably did all sorts of other charitable activities which everyone else thought to be good. But they were not good; they did not please

God. The Pharisee himself was not good. Why? St. Paul says, "... whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." Therefore, that which is good and pleasing to God must come from faith. For where there is faith there is also Christ. God is perfect righteousness and no work can ever please Him—unless the person doing it pleases Him. And the only person who does works pleasing to God is Christ, and He dwells in you.

Good works proceed only from our life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. But what if we forget our good works? God never will, so don't worry about them. True repentance and acknowledgment of our sin proceed also from the Holy Spirit. But what if we presumptuously forget our sins and refuse to repent of them? God will not forget them. And therein reveals the irony: greater benefit awaits us thinking of our sins, than thinking of our good works. The tax collector is justified; the Pharisee is condemned. Or as the Gospel says: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

St. Paul was one such humble/yet exalted man, like the tax collector. "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am ..." Paul was the enemy of the church, but by God's grace He became great among the apostles. Just as creation arose out of nothing, for all were created out of nothing, even so, our rebirth and justification came forth out of nothing by the Word of God. If not for that Word, we indeed are nothing.

So live the life of the tax collector. Acknowledge your sins. Humble yourself before all mankind. For He who humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on the cross-- He will exalt you. When others cease to forgive you, He already has forgiven you to the fullest. Though others are ashamed of you, He honors you above all.

Great be our sins, but far greater is the satisfaction Christ has made for them. Great is our unrighteousness, but greater still is His righteousness for us. We admit our guilt; He remits it. We reveal our sin; He conceals it. We uncover it; He hides it. In us is nothing but sin and condemnation; in Him there is nothing but grace for us and salvation. We have committed every damnable sin; but He has omitted nothing that will graciously save us. Our sins committed against others cry aloud for vengeance, but His Blood more strongly cries out for our forgiveness. Our sins mightily accuse us before God, but Christ's passion is mightier for our defense. Our wicked lives clamor for condemnation, but His holy and righteous life pleads more powerfully still for our salvation. What do you do when confronted with sin? Rejoice in the Savior who covers them all! Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠