

## Sermon for Trinity 11 – Luke 18:9-14

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

Two men go up to do the same thing, and yet it's not the same. Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground. Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. These two men did the same thing, namely bringing offerings to the Lord, and yet it wasn't the same. Cain gave an offering of the fruit of the ground. We're not told that it was the first-fruits. Perhaps he was thinking, "What if God does not provide me with beyond what I see? I must hold something back ..." But Abel gave his offering in faith. He gave the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. That means Abel trusted that God would provide more to his flock, even though his best was burned up and gone. He trusted God would provide a greater sacrifice to undo the curse. Both men gave an offering, but their hearts were in far different places. This difference led to conflict. Cain would plant the ground not with seed, but with his brother Abel's blood as he struck and murdered him in the field. This blood cried out to God for vengeance.

Two men go up to do the same thing, and yet it's not the same. The Pharisee goes to the Temple, prays, and goes home satisfied. The tax collector does the same. And yet, what a difference there is between these two men! The Pharisee's "praying" was him gloating about the many good works he did and how much better he was than other sinners, and then he goes home satisfied. His trust was in his own merits and the fact that he could eek out ahead of the "real sinners" by comparison. He has exalted himself, so surely God must exalt him, right?!? Thus a shred of doubt cuts into the Pharisees inflated ego. But then there was the tax collector. His only prayer was completely devoid of merits and comparisons. "God be merciful to me, a sinner." He humbled himself. But by God's mercy, he is exalted. He goes down to his house justified. Not based on his merits. Not based on comparison to other sinners. He is declared God's own child. His righteousness is founded upon God's promised forgiveness—a sure foundation indeed.

So what can we say about this? Humble yourself if you want God to exalt you. Beware of exalting yourself lest God humble you. It's exalting ourselves that we must avoid. When God in his wisdom and according to His determination gives us sinners some gift or ability, it's natural to exalt ourselves and look down on others who have not received such a gift. Sometimes this happens in a blunt way (outright bragging). Sometimes this happens in a more subtle way (not sharing a gift with others). Whatever the case, the prophet Jeremiah cries out: "Thus saith the Lord: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches.'" If we receive greater physical strength, nicer clothes, more money, a little more insight, or greater intellectual gifts than others, it often appears, if not so much in words, then still in our conduct, that we exalt ourselves because of these things and even rely on them. And remember, it's not so much the gifts themselves, but our tendency to rely on them and put our trust in them that causes us much problems.

Do you ever stop and wonder: Why has God given me these gifts (whatever they may be)? Is it to exalt myself? To find glory in being me? What would happen if you were without these gifts? What if it was just you, the person? Few people have the ability to see themselves as they really are. Fewer yet would let others see their true nature as sinners. We're awful

good at hiding. But all the better reason for us to use all our gifts for God's glory which means to serve for our neighbor's benefit. "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

The other trap that the Pharisee fell into was the game of comparisons. He relied on himself being more righteous and better than others. He thought he could rely on that fact and stand before God because at least he wasn't as bad as that guy. He looked down on others. But how all too easy it is for us to fall into the same trap. When the law convicts us, we too like to set up the "degrees of depravity." It's not hard to look around and find a thief more greedy, an unfaithful spouse who's actually cheated, a hate-filled person who's actually murdered. You don't have to look far to find someone less righteous. Quite the contrary, we like to keep these examples ready in mind so when we're called out on a sin, we're never as bad as *that*.

Complacent sinners often excuse themselves by saying that they are no worse than others, or they take comfort in the fact that they are better in one thing or another than somebody else. We want to justify ourselves with the thought that even though we are weak we still have good intentions for the future. Outwardly we know God's Word, so we rely on the fact that at least we are not like the Pharisees. But the fact that we don't tolerate being corrected or rebuked without pointing the finger at others shows that our heart is still very much in the service of loving the world and this temporal life. We're not too far off from the Pharisees after all. We don't want to be sinners whose mouths are stopped at God's judgment. But we are. The truth is that we are sinners, unrighteous and guilty of God's wrath. "A lost and condemned sinner" is rightly our title. Even if we know only some of what we are and think that God finds us better off than the worst sinner in the world, then we have indeed fallen and don't know what *grace* is. We really are idolaters robbing God of His glory, instead of trusting in Him alone. We can and we should say nothing more than the tax collector's prayer: "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Two men go up to do the same thing, and yet it's not the same. In 1 Corinthians 15, St. Paul tells us, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Two men doing the same thing, yet not the same. The first man is every man, woman, and child; yes, every sinner. Should our Lord not tarry in His return, we will die. Our hearts will stop beating. Our lungs will stop breathing. Our neurons will stop firing. We will die and be buried, returned to the ground from which we came. After all, such is the wages of sin that we justly deserve.

But the Second Man did the same thing, yet not the same. There Christ hung on the cross. Looking down on us; not in some Pharisaic comparison, but exalted in shame, looking on us with mercy and pity. His heart stops beating. His lungs stop breathing. His neurons stop firing. His blood soaks the grounds. He dies. He is buried in a borrowed tomb. He pays the wages of our sin that He did not commit. But it's not the same, for 3 days later he rose from the dead, never to die again. Death's curse is undone. Look to Him! He's alive! Jesus' glory is your glory! Amen.

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