

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 18:9-14

Today's parable is pretty straightforward, isn't it? To whom did Jesus tell it? Luke tells us, doesn't he? ***"[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt..."*** Every parable has a point, and the point of this parable is clear. Who is righteous, and how do they become that way? That is what this parable is intended to teach.

Notice how those who trusted they were righteous treated others. They treated them with contempt. They thought they were better than them, and more than that, they thought those they supposed to be beneath them in spiritual vitality unworthy of any respect at all.

This is the first mistake we can make when it comes to assessing how we stand before God, when we do so through a comparison with others. And this is usually a rather flattering way to deal with the matter, because we can usually find someone who seems more sinful than us, whether it be a friend, a relative, or just some poor wretch in the gutter. As I've joked before, the easiest way to look skinny, easier than working out and watching what you eat, is to stand next to someone less skinny. But while that might make you look better in comparison with someone else, it doesn't actually make you any better, any skinner, does it? It doesn't solve anything at all. You and your more portly companion both have the same problem, albeit perhaps to different degrees: you need to lose some extra baggage.

This parable was addressed to those who ***"trusted in themselves that they were righteous."*** What does that mean? Jesus shows us in the person of the Pharisee in our parable. What did the Pharisee do when he came before God? He recalled all his great works, didn't he? He told God why He should be impressed with him. And he'd done some nice things, hadn't he, some things that we might even consider good works at first glance. He'd ***fasted***. He'd ***tithed***. These are indeed very worthwhile and beneficial deeds if performed through faith and out of love for God. But is that why the Pharisee had done them? Had he done them out of gratitude to God for His grace and mercy in Christ and out of love for His Redeemer? The way he begins his prayer answers that with a resounding "No."

Listen to how he began his prayer: ***"God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."*** He wasn't thankful for God's mercy. He was thankful he was better than everyone else, than other men, especially than this tax collector with his downcast gaze. His "thank you" wasn't so much thankfulness at all, but bragging, but boasting. I suppose you could say that He was thankful to God for creation, and for the ordering of society, but not really for His mercy, right? Why? Because he didn't think he needed mercy. Otherwise he would have asked for it first things first.

This is the second mistake we can make when it comes to assessing how we stand before God. We can look to our good works for salvation. While it is true that good works are evidence of faith that receives salvation, we are not saved by good works. Do you remember our second lesson from last week? Why did Paul say some of the Jews stumbled and were not saved? ***"Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works"*** (Romans 9:32) And in case we missed it then, he repeats himself this week, doesn't he, in our second lesson? He writes to the Ephesians, ***"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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The Pharisees good works weren't good works at all. They were done to earn something, not to give something. He was working for a wage, not in and through faith. And unfortunately, Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans that ***“For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”*** (Romans 14:23). Does that mean that the good things that unbelievers do aren't as beneficial for our neighbor and for society as much as the believer's good deeds? No, not at all. But it does mean that God doesn't receive such works as works of love done for Him, as evidence of faith, as perfect in Christ. He still sees whatever selfishness might have motivated them, or whatever hope for some kickback was attached to them, or whatever sin might cling to them. As Isaiah says, ***“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away”*** (Isaiah 64:6). Only in Christ can our filthy rags be made white and spotless, and only through faith can we be in Christ.

Let me put it another way. What are true good works? St. Paul told us in our second lesson, which I just read. ***Good works are what Christ our Savior has prepared in advance for us to walk in them.*** Who does truly good works, both inside and out? The Christian, through faith, as God wipes off the sin that stains all we do and receives them as testimonies of our love for Him, evidenced through kindnesses to our neighbor.

So how are we justified, that is, declared righteous, right with God, in God's eyes? Jesus tells us. We read, ***“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”***

We confess our unrighteousness. We confess our unworthiness. We acknowledge our sins. We admit that no matter how much good we might try to do to balance the scale, balancing the scale can't take away our sins. A thief can do a thousand good works for every theft, but when put on trial for his thievery, he is condemned a thief and punished as such. The good he did is wonderful, but it cannot erase his crimes. And God's court is no different.

The tax collector went home justified. Go home justified. Go home justified, not because your sins are less obvious than someone else's, and not because you've done some good deeds, but because Christ has kept the law perfectly for you, has died the death you deserve to die in punishment for your sins, and has risen to declare His righteousness yours, eternal life your inheritance, not by works, but through faith.

This then runs over into our relationships with others. Those who have received mercy will also show it. Those who have been forgiven will forgive. Those who have been lifted up will lift up others. This is the byproduct of our justification. In every area of your life, therefore, humble yourself before the Lord and for your neighbor, and trust that God will thus exalt you, will lift you up. Children of God, after all, are not perfect people, but people who realize their imperfection and turn to God in Christ for grace, for aid, and for inspiration, who have come to know the depth of their sin yet at the same time have experienced the breadth of God's grace. Amen.

