

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 18:9-14

Go home justified.

Those who would find mercy must mercilessly beat their breasts and pummel their pride. There's a little Pharisee in each of you, kissing cousin with the old Adam who's hung his fig leaves on your flesh. So far you've been a wonderful landlord, but its time to take out the trash. However, you can't evict what you won't acknowledge.

I speak as one whose enjoyed my time in the front pew. I've had the nights where I've prayed the Pharisees prayer, recited my merits to Christ, wondered what's wrong with you, what's wrong with the neighboring pastor. I've assessed your errors and numbered your missteps with no problem while seriously underestimating my own. You've done the same, whether or not your backsides have ever met the front pew's padded blue. You know your husband's faults, your wife's, your son's, your daughter's, your mother's, your father's, and so on and so forth, etc. and whatnot. We've all detailed the sins of another, to ourselves and perhaps also to our God. We all like to toot our own horn, to sing a hymn in our honor, to weigh ourselves next to the fat man.

Problem is, your horn's out of tune, filled with the spittle of your self-righteousness, your hymn doesn't rhyme, and you are the fat man, even if you'd drown in husky clothes as the heavenly Father would drown your sin in Baptism. Your most pious thoughts, at least in the estimation of our convenient opinion of the law, are your most damning. Your eyes may set your sight on another, but God did put them in your own head for a reason. Roll them, all they way over, and see who you are.

Good news is you don't have to start collecting taxes. You've already done that. You've collected the wages of sin, and that is death. But death stinks—really. If you don't believe me, smell it some time. There is a reason God made our bodies rot, so do like Jacob; trade your inheritance. Sell off the flies and worm food and buy an empty tomb. It's the deal of the century.

Two men went to the temple to pray. Us and him. You decide for yourself which you are. One went to tell God what he'd done and why He should bless him. The other went to tell God what he'd done and why He should damn him. One thought he was better than the other, when he was really worse, because at least the other was an honest sinner and not a sinner in denial, because God blesses those who know they should be damned and damns those who hold court about how worthy they are of God's blessing.

The tax collector beat his breast. His heart was the problem. He wanted to knock some sense into it. His heart was the problem, because it was *his* heart. You don't own hearts; you rent them. The last thing you want is your own heart. That's a recipe for destruction. It's quickly off warranty and out of commission. The tax collector beat his breast. Beat your breast. Abuse it. Put it to death, because you need a transplant.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Say it. Say it or join another church. I can name you three dozen that would like to have you, are willing to tell you how great you are in order to keep you, will save you a spot in the front pew and give you time to tell everyone how wonderful you’ve been this week, and that’s without opening the phonebook.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Mean it. And that’s the problem. Some churches might tell you to say it, but, no, we actually expect you to mean it too. **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** If you don’t want to mean it, you’re only digging the hole deeper, all the way to hell, by saying it. You is or you aint. **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”** is like “I love you.” It’s no joke. It’s commitment. You’ll either be the sinner or you won’t. God will either be the Savior or He won’t. Be the sinner and God will be the Savior. Why? Because you’ve got to love it when a plan comes together, and God has a plan, and this is it.

At one dinner where Einstein was being honored...he got so distracted that he pulled out his notepad and began scribbling equations. When he was introduced, the crowd burst into a standing ovation, but he was still lost in thought. [A friend] caught his attention and told him to get up. He did, but noticing the crowd standing and applauding, he assumed it was for someone else and heartily joined in. [A friend] had to come over and inform him that the ovation was for him. (*Einstein: His Life and Universe*, by Walter Isaacson, page 439)

Such is the case with the tax collector. He is praised by Christ, but never would have expected such praise. He openly confesses he is the least of all men, but, in Christ, he becomes the shining example for all. So also, when it comes to our relationship with God, let us be quick to stand and cheer for another but slow to take the stage ourselves.

There’s a reason we stand down for the confession of sins—you and I But then I do something odd, don’t I? I step up. I walk up to the altar, the symbol of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, where our sins became His and His righteousness became ours, and I say to you what Jesus said of the tax collector, and believe me when I say that you only receive it properly when you receive it as the tax collector and not as the Pharisee, even if you’ve never collected a tax in your life: **“You go home justified. You are God’s son, wicked though you’ve been. You are God’s daughter, ashamed as you are to lift your eyes toward heaven. You are the heir of God’s selfless plan, selfish as your plans have been. You are the rich heir of Christ’s last will and testament, poor as the investments of your sinful will have made you.”**

Like it or not, there are two parts in this play. One sets a table for Christ consisting of one’s own deluded works and self-centered thinking. One leaves the table bare for Christ to bring His own life-saving Meal. Be the second. Tell Christ you’ve nothing to offer and receive the everything His death and resurrection serve up. It’s hard to learn, I know. You have to beat it into yourself. So have no mercy with your sinful flesh. Tape its mouth, stop its ears, plug its nose, and handcuff its hands. How? Give it to Christ. The new Adam died for the right to put the old Adam to death, and He will do just that, drowning your sinful nature in a baptismal flood that makes Noah’s seem like a drop in a very small bucket.

Grab the flesh a pillow and let it cry. You’re a sinner, and if you’re going to be one—and you are, because that’s what you were born—you might as well be the best kind: an honest

sinner. The flesh hates an honest sinner, because honesty is a gift from God alone. Own up to your sin and let Christ take ownership of you. Let the old Adam whine as Christ rakes up his fig leaves and dresses you in the white robe of His resurrection. You are a sinner—precisely the kind Jesus came to save, the kind with real sins and a real need for a Savior. Beat your breast, tell God what you are, and then open up your ears and shut your mouth long enough to hear Him speak: *“I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* Go home justified, or don’t go home at all. Amen.