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Year* by C.F.W. Walther
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The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
(Luke 18:9-14)

May God grant you all abundant grace and peace through the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

In the same, our precious Savior, beloved hearers!

If a man is to be saved at some point, he must first be righteous [be justified] before God. This is an entirely indisputable and irrefutable rule. God is certainly not a God pleased by godless ways; whoever is evil cannot remain before Him. God would have to cease to be God, to be the eternal God and the perfectly good Being, if He joined Himself eternally with an unrighteous creature. As little as the fire can have fellowship with the water and the light with the darkness, so little can God, that sin-consuming fire and pure eternal light,¹ have fellowship with the unrighteous. For this reason, God in the past has given His law to man: *“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy”*²; and the situation must remain the same in time and in eternity. God has already written this law in the heart of man in creation, so that each individual man’s conscience slugs him when he does evil, whether more strongly or more weakly, and says to him that he has thereby become displeasing to God. Since the law, however, is shrouded in darkness in the hearts of men after the fall, indeed, in many cases, is erased, God has publicly and solemnly proclaimed it upon Sinai anew through Moses and repeated, confirmed, and expounded it through all His prophets and apostles. As certainly, then, as God must remain God, so certainly God does not want to, will not, and cannot revoke this law of His. Christ Himself, the Savior, has not come to cancel the same [the law]. He says Himself in His Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

So there is no doubt that whoever does not have the righteousness of one who perfectly keeps the holy law of God cannot be saved.

It is now by all means certainly true that God is love, goodness, patience, long-suffering, and mercy Himself [personified]. All these attributes are the very essence of God and He also has them all accordingly in similar high grace. Men, therefore, can indeed do something out love, and thereby damage righteousness; but for God that is impossible. God

¹ I am not sure about this phrase. The German is: *das die Sünde verzehrende Feuer und reine ewige Licht.*

² Leviticus 19:2

is not a God who gives a law and then can be content even though it is not perfectly kept. No, what He commands and what He threatens must come to pass, and before heaven and earth go to the ground [come to an end]. All men who believe that God is merely some sort of weak human father who is not always earnest with His commands and threats succeed, in so doing, only in slandering the undamaged majesty of God, and the God who they carry about in their thoughts is nothing other than an imaginary self-made god, nothing other than a vain idol. All such men who do not have perfect righteousness according to the law of God and have thereby abandoned themselves upon the love of God have, for that reason, a completely vain hope, and will thus certainly go on to lose eternally, for God is certainly a holy and righteous God.

But how, my dear ones, is it then possible after all this that a man can become such an individual who possesses a real, valid righteousness before God? Are not all men already from birth full of sinful thoughts and desires? And what man who is awake can, if the commands of God are held up to him, without lying say: “I have kept that all from my youth on,” or, “I am pure in my heart and undefiled by my sins”? Must each not rather say, even the most pious of men: “We are altogether sinners and completely unworthy of the honor we should with respect to God.”

How? Must all men thus, because God must remain righteous, be lost?—No, no, my beloved, there is—praised be the eternal mercy of God for it—a way, upon which each man, even a sinner, indeed even the greatest sinner, can become righteous before God and thus be saved, so that God all the while remains a righteous God, as He must be. It is a mystery that could never have arisen in the heart of any man unless God Himself had revealed it to us men in His Gospel. Our Gospel for today also deals with this mysterious justification of a poor sinner before God.

Luke 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The most important part of this passage we have just read is that which the Lord speaks about the tax collector: *“This man went home justified rather than the other.”* We see from this that the Lord wants to show by the attitudes of the Pharisee and the tax collector how even a poor sinner can be justified before God. Upon this basis, let me now speak to you about this attitude:

About the justification of a poor sinner before God according to the Gospel;

I hereby show you three things:

1. Wherein the same stands,
2. What firm foundation he has, and finally
3. whereby alone it is attained.

O Lord God, who Himself prepared for us sinners a way to righteousness and blessedness and has revealed to us in Your Gospel a bright way upon which even the fool may not err, we beg You to yet give us grace so that we all come to know this way not only for living, but also to walk and travel it all the way to its eternal blessed end. O enlighten yet our understanding, so that this way is not foolishness to us, and rule our hearts, so that it is not an annoyance to us. Oh, you have already indeed brought a million sinners upon this way, filled with trust in life and death, and finally into Your eternal kingdom! Do that also therefore for us sinners, and bless Your Word accordingly also in this hour, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

I.

There is, my beloved, no religion which does not want to show man a way that he can become righteous before God and, in that way, be saved. Which way, however, do the different religions show [man]? The heathen says: You want to be righteous, so give to each what is his; you have, however, not always fulfilled this obligation, so sacrifice to God. The Jew says: You want to be righteous, so be circumcised and keep the law of Moses and the teachings of our ancients. The Mohammedan says: You want to be righteous, so confess that there is only one god and Muhamed is his prophet, and act in harmony with the rules of our Koran. The pope says: You want to be righteous, so keep the commands of God and of the Church, and you will thereby rightly become certain of your salvation, so abandon the world, go into a cloister, and therein keep the threefold vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The enthusiast says: You want to be righteous, so pray, wrestle, and struggle until you have obtained another heart and emotions, and you will then rightly go securely, so do not rest until you are perfect and no longer sin. The rationalist or reason-believer finally says: You want to be righteous, so train yourself in virtue and do honorable works, and, if you've felt compelled to [*hast du aber gefehlt*], repent and improve yourself.

You see from this how different indeed the answers are that the different religions give to the question of how man becomes righteous before God, but also how they all nevertheless boil down to this: that man should and can participate in becoming righteous before God and being saved through external good works, through heartfelt moral improvements.

What now, though, does the Gospel say today about this? Therein we find exactly the opposite about all of this.

Namely, therein a Pharisee and a tax collector are placed before our eyes. The Pharisee, however, is painted for us as a man full of so-called good works, the tax collector, on the other hand, as a poor sinner without any good works whatsoever. About the Pharisee it is said that he has gone into the temple to pray and has here told God in his heart: "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*" About the tax collector, however, it is said that he has none of these things with which to boast of himself, so that he, instead, has had to shame himself before God and men on account of his unrighteousness up to the present time, so that, for that reason, he has not even wanted to lift his eyes, but has only beaten on his breast and sighed: "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"

And yet—how wonderful!—Christ says that this tax collector went home justified before Him, that also the Pharisee went home without having been justified by all his good works and all his righteousness before men.

Wherein, then, should the righteousness of a poor sinner before God lie also hereafter according to the Gospel? You see, it lies clearly not in the fact that the man himself has made

himself righteous before God through his own external, so-called good works or through an achieved or infused spiritual holiness, but rather in the fact that God has not, out of grace, reckoned against his sins the man who is and remains a poor sinner, but, instead of that, has reckoned, looked upon, and declared the same to be righteous. The righteousness of a man before God according to the Gospel is also a matter that the man himself does not accomplish, but which is accomplished by God for him. It is not something that is in the man, namely, in his heart, but something that is outside of the man, namely, something that takes place in the heart of God Himself. It is not the similar to the work of a doctor who actually frees the sick one from his sickness and again restores the health of the same, but is rather similar to the work of a judge who acquits and releases an accused and convicted wrongdoer, absolving him not only from all punishment, but also attributing to him, instead of his offence, the rights of a blameless burgher. The justification of a man before God according to the Gospel is not like one being actually purified from stains, but like one being clothed with a beautiful white robe, whereby the stains are only concealed. It is, with a word, forgiveness of sins, and indeed, one such according to which God also sees the man as if he had never committed a sin, but as if he were always as perfectly holy and righteous as the law requires all men to be. The mystery of this justification David and all the saints of the old covenant already understood very well. For that reason, David does not write in Psalm 32: Blessed is he who has committed no sins and from all sins is pure; but: *“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him.”*

II.

So then, we have now briefly seen wherein the justification of a poor sinner before God lies according to the Gospel; it now emerges as the most important question whether or not there is also a firm foundation for that view. And, therefore, let me now speak to of the second part.

Whoever, my beloved, is a sinner and yet nevertheless still hopes to be saved since he abandons himself upon the goodness of God, has a hope that is, as we have already heard, without any firm foundation, since God is not only love, but also holiness itself, not only goodness grace, patience, and long-suffering, but also unimpaired righteousness. To this end, it therefore also appears that the justification of a poor sinner before God according to our Gospel is lacking a little with regards to a firm foundation. For what does it benefit a poor sinful man, should one consider it, if the grace of God reckons, looks at, and declares him righteous, if the holiness and righteousness of God similarly must condemn and damn him? But isn't justification according to our Gospel also in this way opposed to the essence, attributes, will, and unchangeable law of God, as the righteousness of all other false religions teaches?

So it clearly appears; but, God be praised, it only appears so. The justification according to the Gospel instead has such a firm foundation that can overthrow it, neither in heaven, nor upon the earth, nor in hell.

This is indeed not expressly stated in our Gospel, but still is nonetheless indicated most clearly therein. For therein it is relayed to us that the tax collector, who went home to his house justified, had first sighed, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* One, however, asks the original language for advice concerning what these words means strictly speaking, and sees from this that the tax collector really wanted to say by this: *“God, be reconciled to me, a sinner!”* The tax collector had therefore taken his refuge not in general in the goodness and grace of God, but specifically in his reconciling grace; he also had his hope grounded in the grace, which would be won for men through the reconciling work of the Savior.

There you have the firm foundation upon which justification according to our Gospel rests. It rests, with a word, upon the work and word of the reconciliation of Jesus Christ.

Consider, as fallen as we men were in the guilt of sin, there was surely no help for us, neither from ourselves, nor from the angels, nor from any other creature. Indeed, it also would appear in this case that even God Himself could not save us. For even if God wanted to forgive us sinners out of grace, his strong unimpaired righteousness would have, on the contrary, raised an eternal objection. Yet, though it was impossible for all creatures to give counsel in this case and to find a means to help, this was not impossible for the wisdom of God. It knew and created counsel. And what has God done? Since we men could not pay the immeasurable debt of our sins ourselves and be declared righteousness with the righteousness of God without payment of the same, see—O wonder above all wonders!—God allowed His one only begotten Son Himself to become a man and imputed to Him the debt of our sin, and He, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, paid our debt in our place through His holy life and through His bitter suffering and death. And when He now had paid our debt up to our last farthing, God the Father raised Him again from the dead and gave to him power to proclaim, offer, and hand over the accomplished payment of debt and, with it, forgiveness, righteousness, life, and salvation to all men.

See then the foundation of the justification of a poor sinner before God according to the Gospel! How? Is this foundation not firm enough? If He says so Himself, can a doubt yet remain, whether a guilty one cannot be credited his debt if another already has paid for his debt up to the last farthing? But how can righteousness not hinder grace if such a guilty one is declared to be guiltless? Instead, shouldn't righteousness itself have to topple that judgment of grace? Indeed, that is how it is, my dear ones; to that end, John also writes in his first letter about justification according to the Gospel, or the forgiveness of sins, as a wonderful expression, not of grace, but directly of the faithfulness and righteousness of God and says: "*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*"

Thus it is for this reason certain, my beloved, that the justification of a poor sinner before God stands completely firm according to the Gospel, for it rests just as much upon the righteousness, holiness, and faithfulness of God as upon His goodness and grace; your foundation is that the Son of God has already reconciled all men, that He has already paid the debt of guilt of your sins and offered to you forgiveness and made offering for your forgiveness and righteousness.

III.

Although, my dear ones, we now know wherein the justification of a poor sinner before God lies according to the Gospel and what firm foundation it has, so let us still in the third place seek to know whereby it is attained.

The Pharisee has not attained it according to our text. Why not? Not for this reason, that he was free from gross sins and was an honorable man in the eyes of the world, but for this reason, as it says in the beginning of our text, that "*who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,*" that is, with a word, that he was self-righteous. But why now does the tax collector go home justified rather than the Pharisee? Through what exactly has he obtained this highest and costliest of all good things? Because we learn from our text, he does not consider the attainment of justification before God something to do, for which he wants to be praised before God. Rather, he went into the temple as he was, as a poor, lost and damned sinner, loaded and weighed down with the burden of his great guilt, entirely despairing and abandoning any hope in his own righteousness and piety, where the mercy seat was, which foreshadowed the reconciliation of the Messiah. Here he seeks the help that he

cannot find in himself, beats on his breast and sighs only: “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner!*” Or, as the original for our text more clearly shouts: “*God, be reconciled to me, a sinner!*” Casting off any other trust in himself, he thus made the reconciliation of the Savior his only trust; he applied what should happen to all sinners especially to his own person; he takes hold of that in faith and see!—thus he then goes home, as the Lord clearly says in our text, justified.

One says, therefore, what is it then according to our text through which the justification according to the Gospel is attained. It is this, with a word: nothing other than that faith and, indeed, faith alone.

And it can indeed be no other way. What can a guilty one do when another has paid the price for him to be free from guilt? He must receive the payment made for him. What must an offender with whom the one he has most offended has reconciled do in order to be reconciled? He must receive the reconciliation. What must the prisoner whose prison has already been opened for him do in order to enjoy freedom? He must receive the freedom granted to him and leave the prison opened for him. What must the accused and convicted criminal do who already has been pardoned do in order to enjoy the pardon? He must receive the pardon. See, the punishment for sin is already paid for all men by Christ, the prison of the wrath of God and of hell is opened, the pardon of all men is effected and proclaimed and offered through the gospel to all men. What should and can a man do, therefore, in order to be able to enjoy all of this with joy? Nothing, nothing at all further than that he must receive all of this; this even, however, is nothing other than faith.

Yes, my beloved, believe, believe, that is the only thing through which justification is attained according to the Gospel; not, though, in such a way that because faith is such a good work or such a superb condition of the heart God wants and must look upon the man as righteous for the sake of the same; it is also not in such a way that because the man at least must do something at all, even in the least to that end [God wants and must look upon the man as righteous for the sake of the same]; but in such a way that because the man can and has done nothing, entirely nothing for his justification, because his righteousness has already been acquired by Christ and is offered to all in the Gospel, which is heard, offered, delivered, and distributed. Therefore St. Paul says, “*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*”³ *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*”⁴ *However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*”⁵

How, my friends, is that not an inexpressibly sweet, a heavenly sweet teaching for us poor sinners? Can a hell be deep enough and agonizing enough for those who cast this teaching aside out of the pride of enmity toward God and self-righteousness and do not want to be justified as a poor sinner before God and saved? O that there might be no one among us for whom this teaching is foolishness and an annoyance! For this teaching is the sunshine of heaven [*Himmelssonne*] of the Christian religion, through which it is distinguished from all other religions as the light is distinguished from the darkness. For this teaching is also the treasure that our Evangelical Lutheran Church alone among all the sects of Christianity has retained pure and held to firmly. Hold firmly to this teaching as well, my faithful Lutheran brothers and sisters! If you will do that, then you at all times have Jacob’s ladder upon earth; then you have at all times in the darkness of every temptation [*Anfechtungen*] a brightly radiating light of heaven; then you have even in the deep floods of death the true anchor of heaven, which will not let you sink.

³ Here Walther seems to quote several passages as one. The first is Romans 10:4

⁴ Romans 3:28

⁵ Romans 4:5

Oh, my beloved, precisely now, where the pestilence of cholera has again unfolded its wide jaws of death, precisely now we now we need the pure teaching about justification so much! It is the best, indeed, the only secure preservative and medication. You need this medicine so no fear of death torments you, and if death finally entangles you with its ice-cold arms, then you will not despair, but with the tax collector call out in faith: "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*" And if your ear and eye and mouth are closed in death, all the angels in heaven and God himself will open their mouth and call over you: "This one goes justified," not, "down," but up, yes, up "to his house," into the house of heaven.

Help us, then, with that all, Jesus Christ, our Reconciler, our eternal Righteousness, praised above all in time and eternity. Amen.