



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost    October 23, 2016**

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**“The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector”**

*(Luke 18:9-14)*

Rev. David K. Groth

**COLLECT:** Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we to pray and always ready to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour down on us the abundance of Your mercy; forgive us those things of which our conscience is afraid; and give us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask except by the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ. Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Let's not be too quick to dismiss this Pharisee. He's puffed up and arrogant, for sure. And he's not really praying as much as he's going on a little ego trip. However, he does take God seriously. He fasts twice a week. The last time I fasted was in preparation for a medical procedure. He tithes ten percent of everything he receives. That is, he puts his money where his mouth is. Fifty percent of protestants in America give less than 1% of their income. This Pharisee, he's not dabbling at religion like so many Watertownians do. No he's dead serious about it. Nothing's more important to him. He fasts. He tithes. He studies. He prays. He worships. He serves. His skin is in the game. He takes God very, very seriously . . . so we should take him seriously.

And let's not be too quick to beatify this Tax Collector and put him on the calendar of saints. He's a Tax Collector, which means he's fleecing his own people for the benefit of his own portfolio. He's a willing participant in a cruel and corrupt system of collecting taxes. Moreover, he's collaborating with the enemy. He's employed by the Roman occupiers of the land, the infidels from the West. I picture him as a barrel chested tough guy with a hide as thick as a hippo and a Jersey accent. While his prayer is humble and sincere, his life is by all measures repugnant.

So what's the real difference between these two men in the parable of Jesus? What does Jesus want us to know about repentance? Here it is in a nutshell. The Pharisee measures himself against other people, and comes out smelling like roses. Hence his haughtiness. The tax

collector measures himself against holy God and comes out smelling like . . . a first generation outhouse; hence his humility before God.

The problem, of course, is self-righteousness. Notice the Pharisee's prayer: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."

Notice, in such a little prayer, he uses the pronoun "I" five times, and the word God just once. It's all about him; somewhere in his theology God was forgotten. (By the way, we should be careful of some of the new Christian songs which make the same mistake. It's all about the worshipper, how he or she is feeling, how he or she will praise and serve and thank and live, and somehow God is forgotten, gone, buried beneath all those me's, my's and I's.)

In any event, the problem is self-righteousness, thinking only of ourselves and, measuring ourselves up against other people. We carefully choose those people too, in order to puff and prop ourselves up. We see the mom in the grocery store whose kids are completely out of control. And they've learned to ignore her incessant scolding and we think, "Thank God I'm not her . . . or thank God I at least had the sense not to marry someone like her." We catch a glimpse of a house in shambles, where no one ever picks up after themselves, and we think, "Thank God I'm not like that." We see and smell and hear the rig rattling down the road, belching blue/gray exhaust, the left rear tire is a donut spare, and we think, "Thank God I have my act together." We see someone doing, or trying to do the same job we do, but they fail or somehow fall short of our old fashioned standards and training, and we think to ourselves, "Thank God I'm not like that." We hear of the sin of others in our community, and pretend on the outside to be sad and dismayed while on the inside we are quietly gleeful, because they make it easier to dismiss our own sin as mere indiscretions.

You know what a peccadillo is? It's a small,

relatively unimportant offense or sin, a misdemeanor rather than a felony, a faux pas rather than a criminal act, venial sin rather than mortal. We think ourselves lightly salted with peccadillos, but certainly not covered over with black, greasy sin and wickedness. We think ourselves occasionally suffering from the temporary lapse of good judgment, but think of others as stewing in the marinade of bad judgment. We think of our own peccadillos as the by-product of unreasonable expectations at work. Or we're the victims of a spouse that isn't holding up his/her end, or of kids who don't understand the stresses we face. We dismiss, and deflect, and cover over our own transgressions, while shining bright white surgical lights on the crud of others. You see how easily we can become this Pharisee? We should be repenting day in and day out, but one false, proud look at our neighbor can spoil everything and turn away the grace God wants to give us.

The Pharisee was smug and arrogant. Most of us think of ourselves as humble. But there's a certain arrogance even in that, isn't there? You're taking pride in your humility. Humility has been called the "shy virtue," because once you start thinking of yourself as humble, humility flies away and hides. C.S. Lewis said, "Christian humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less." It is a blessed self-forgetfulness.

Let's dig a little deeper. There are basically two kinds of professing Christians in the world. The first are those who in their heart of hearts believe, "I obey; therefore I am accepted by God. God is pleased with me because of the life I live." The second are those who say, "I am accepted by God only through Christ. Therefore, I try to obey."

Notice, both are striving to obey the law of God, to pray, to give money generously, to be good family members. But they are doing so out of radically different motives, and it has a huge impact on their character. Those who believe they are accepted by God because of their obedient lifestyles . . . they cannot handle criticism. They get furious and defensive . . . or become devastated because they cannot

tolerate threats to their self-image of being a “good person.” They feel a constant need to find fault, and to win the argument. Their humor is cutting and sarcastic, or they have no sense of humor at all. C.S. Lewis speaks of “the unsmiling concentration upon Self, which is the mark of hell.” When people build their identity around self-worth, on being hard-working and theologically sound, they simply must look down on those whom they perceive to be lazy or theologically weak.

But when our identity is built not on our self-image of being a good person . . . when our identity is built instead on being God’s child by grace, then it becomes much harder to look down on others. Those who understand the Gospel get little comfort from comparing themselves to others because we know we have been saved not by our doctrine or our strong moral character, but by grace . . . only by grace. It has an impact on our character. I think the Gospel creates in us a gentle sense of irony. We find a lot to laugh at, beginning with our own weaknesses. They don’t threaten us anymore because our ultimate worth is not based on our record or performance, but on Christ. Our identity is not all wrapped up in our obedience, but in God’s grace in Jesus.

It’s grace that distinguishes the Christian faith from every other religion in the world. It’s gracious, self-forgetful humility that should distinguish Christians from all the other types of moral, decent people in the world.

In the parable, the tax collector prayed, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus said, “I tell you this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.” Imagine, this wretched man who fleeced his own people and built a fortune doing it; he was declared righteous. Whereas the Pharisee, the religious one who took God very, very seriously, who fasted and tithed and studied and obeyed . . . he went home unrighteous, unforgiven . . . mostly because he never got around to asking for forgiveness.

In God’s eyes, neither one of them was lightly salted with peccadillos. In God’s eyes, both of them were greased over with sin. Yet it was the Tax Collector who went home

washed, cleansed, forgiven by God, simply because he knew he really needed to be washed, cleansed, and forgiven.

Still today, God is ready to forgive the worst of sinners by his grace in Christ. He gives his righteousness freely to sinners . . . but only to sinners . . . to those who hold out no hope in themselves for eternal life, to those who point to nothing but their hope in Christ alone. He can forgive anyone of anything. There is no sin in your life that's so filthy or foul that it would make God hold his nose and scamper away. Bring it to him. Give it to him. Hold nothing of it back from him. Let him wash you with his blood.

You've been baptized. God has put his name on you. You belong to him. Nothing can threaten that identity. Any threat can make us become unglued when our identity is all wrapped up in good works. But nothing can undo the fact that you've been baptized. He has washed you and continues to wash away the black, sticky grease of your sin. You are not merely forgiven. You are forgiven and set free . . . set free from the crushing burden of keeping up appearances, free to even laugh with others at your own weaknesses. Because of the Gospel, you don't need to compare yourself with others. You can serve them instead. Because of the Gospel, you don't need to look down in order to come out smelling of roses. You can look up and come out smelling clean, utterly clean. Because of the Gospel you don't need to hoard your money to build up your identity. You are free to give it away to build up God's kingdom on earth. And you don't need to give your money to God in order to manipulate him into accepting you, for God already loves you and accepts you. Long before you gave away your first nickel, he has loved you with an everlasting love that is not tied to or conditioned by your generosity, your obedience, or even the quality of your faith.

So there's no need to look down at others to make yourself feel better. Don't look down. Look up. Look up to the cross, to the one dangling there dead. It was for you after all. It was for your forgiveness, for your righteousness.

Don't look down to the sinners around you . . . unless it's to help them out of their mess. Look up to the cross, to Christ crucified. Put your confidence in him, in his righteousness and in his innocence. Direct your praise solely to him. Place your trust squarely on him. Amen.

