

August 15, 2010
Trinity 11
Luke 18:9-14
“You Pharisee”

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

The Pharisee is an offensive character. He doesn't fit in very well with the values of middle America. He is a conceited bigot and easy to hate. The irony is that it is easy to look down on him even as he looked down on the tax-collector and to get caught in a sick spiral where you think you are better than he is because you don't think you're better than other people like he does. Expect you do. You think you're better than him. So to avoid that trap let us try to drudge up some sympathy for the Pharisee.

In the first place his prayer was not so bad as it sounds. We should thank God that we are not like other men, that His mercy has not only kept all of us here out of the hospital this day, but has also kept us from acting out our most evil thoughts. God has spared us. He has kept us from performing our worst desires. Or He has kept us from getting too hurt by them. We've climbed behind the wheel drunk but made it home safely, gotten away with it. We've downloaded pornography but deleted it off the hard-drive and no one knew it was there. We've told lies that were believed. We've looked the other way for expediency and not been called on it. We could be addicts, divorced, imprisoned, friendless, and homeless. There is no sin that is harmless or without victims. Any of them could get carried away and destroy our lives. We could lose everything because we had one too many beers or thought no one would ever know. *Can you imagine the shame you would endure if someone could read your mind? What if the world knew the perverted turns of your day dreams?* Do not think you are better than other men, but thank God that you have been spared so

much of their sorrow. Look at the worst of society with sympathy. It is a thin line that separates you from them.

The tax collector was a traitor to his people. The modern equivalent is not an IRS employee, but something like a drug pusher who hangs around elementary school playgrounds and lures children into addiction and sexual abuse. We're talking the worst sort of men. Now imagine what would run through your mind if you were standing in the line at the grocery store with a unkempt and dangerous-looking man in his late 40's, cigarette dangling from his hand, with a 17 year old girl looking like Miley Cyrus at a concert. *What would think? Would you pray: "Thank you Lord that I am not like him?" Would you pray: "He deserves to go to Hell?"*

That really was the problem with the Pharisee. It wasn't what he said but what he meant, what was in his heart, for he trusted in himself and despised others. He points the tax collector out to God because he wants to be compared. He thinks it will make him look good. But it doesn't. It only shows his sins. Repent.

You have not committed the worst crimes this world has known. You are not guilty of abusing children. But don't let that lead you to believe that compared to a drug pusher or child molester you are righteous. To some degree you are, but the difference between your righteousness and theirs is the difference between calling Pluto a planet or an asteroid. It doesn't really matter. The point of comparison is to the Law. How much you've sinned isn't the issue. You've sinned. Don't dare feel morally superior and despise those who only know hatred and fear. Instead be thankful that God has spared you that path, that He has given you mentors, some level of intelligence and self-control, that you have a community that supports you, and the like. But don't dare to think that you are superior to any other sinner on this planet. All sinners deserve Hell, tax-collectors and Pharisees alike.

This parable serves as a warning. It is not simply **"don't judge a book by its cover"** or **"appearances can be deceiving"** or even **"don't judge a man until you walk a mile in his shoes."**

It is: **“Not everyone who says to Me ‘Lord, Lord’ enters the kingdom of heaven.”** Good works, fasting twice a week and tithing of all that you have, are not enough. You cannot earn your way into God’s favor. The Pharisee did not go down to his house justified. He was condemned. No one who trusts in himself enters into the kingdom of heaven. Repent.

But there is a promise in the parable as well. The tax-collector did go home justified. He threw himself upon God’s mercy in desperation. He had no righteousness of his own. He was ashamed of the things he had done, of the lies he had told, of the evil he had committed against his people and against those who loved him. He wanted to do better. He wanted to start over. To do that he needed mercy, an escape, a Savior and a re-creation in Jesus Christ. He got it. The Lord is merciful. His mercy endures forever. No one who hopes for mercy in Jesus Christ is denied. The tax collector was justified.

Our remaining days on earth are running out. We are closer to death than ever before. It might be August, but the leaves have already begun to fall. Winter is coming. The smell of the apocalypse is in the air. Mercy in Jesus Christ is our only hope.

But that is a hope that cannot fail. Jesus Christ is the revelation of the Father, the bearer and sender of the Holy Spirit. He is mercy in the Flesh, sent to call sinners to repentance, to heal the souls of men disfigured and sick, bent inward on themselves, to rescue those held captive by the devil, tormented by demons, and afraid of the judgment to come. He came to seek and to save the conceited and arrogant, the cheaters and cowards. He came to eat with extortionist, adulterers, tax-collectors, Pharisees, liars, thieves, prostitutes, gang-bangers, and drug pushers. It is not too late. He will even accept and love life-long Lutherans. No one who hopes for mercy in Jesus Christ is denied.

Christ died for your sins. He was buried and rose again. His love is without measure. His grace is sufficient. He has come in mercy for mercy’s sake and His mercy endures forever. He has drained the cup of wrath for you. He spares His people. He covers

them with His Blood and His Blood cries for them to heaven. It does not accuse, it forgives. And it serves as proof of your innocence and perfection in Jesus Christ. The angel of death passes over. You are safe. You belong to Jesus. You wear His Name. You eat His Body. You abide in His mercy. You go down to your house justified this day.

In ✠ Jesus' Name. Amen.