

Luke 18:9-14 This Man Went Home Justified Ash Wednesday February 10, 2016

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Grace and peace from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our Substitute and Savior! Amen.

In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus gives a lesson about what it really takes to be heard and accepted by God.

These are Your Words heavenly Father to keep our trust centered in Christ alone. Your Word is truth.

Dear Christian Friends,

“It’s not my fault!” People use those words to justify themselves when they’ve done wrong. They try to shift the blame to avoid consequences. It’s ironic that people use the word *justify* to make excuses. But *justify* is one of the most important words in the Bible. It means that God declares us not guilty, not because we have excuses, but because His Son has made up for all our sins. This year, we’re going to hear about irony, defined as “a combination of circumstances that result in the opposite of what you might expect.” Jesus’ passion history is filled with irony. Tonight, we’ll consider the irony when Jesus said in a parable:

This man went home justified.

In His parable, Jesus wanted his hearers to be surprised when he told them which man went home justified. **It was not one who kept God’s laws.** Jesus told this parable to people who were confident of their own righteousness and who looked down on everyone else as sinners. *“Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee prayed, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people — robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”* (v.9-12) We cringe at hearing that prayer. But how did the people at Jesus’ time react? The story sounded right to them. Many of them had prayed such a prayer, at least in their hearts.

How we react to the word *Pharisee*? To us, the word means proud and deceitful. We can’t imagine a Pharisee being anything else. The Scriptures back this up. But to the first-century Jew, *Pharisee* meant someone extremely good. St. Paul was a Pharisee and he was proud of it until he came to faith. Pharisees were defenders of the Old Testament law. They held that the Scripture was the Word of God and that all of it was true, unlike the Sadducees who were the theological liberals of their day.

So when this man said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer, it was true. He had not committed a crime that would send him to jail. To put it in modern terms, he didn’t even have a traffic ticket. To any first-century Jew, there was a clear difference between him and the tax collector. Tax collectors were traitors who worked for the Romans by taxing their own Jewish people. Often in the gospels, we see them in the company of other notorious sinners. You’re known by the company you keep. Even more, you’re influenced by the people with you. Without a doubt, many tax collectors plunged into all kinds of sin. Not only did the Pharisee avoid those sins, he gave 10 percent of his income to the Lord, just like Moses’ law commanded and he fasted twice a week. So, it’s easy to see why this man would be pleased with himself and Jesus’ listeners would identify with him and honor him.

So what was his problem? He had sinful pride. One of the great ironies from Scripture is that even though people might do the right thing, if it’s for the wrong reason, it’s not acceptable to God. It’s a sin. This man thought he was earning points with God by doing good things. He thought that he was ahead in God’s record book of good over evil. But, he wasn’t, because he ignored everything God said about repentance.

Another great irony of Scripture is that people who think they can keep God’s laws end up rewriting those laws. They cut out the parts they can’t keep, like having a pure heart or a humble spirit, and they add things they can do—like fasting twice a week. They think they’re doing God’s will. But, it’s not true. This man was not justified. In God’s judgment, he was guilty.

Are we ever in danger self-righteousness? Could this resemble our prayer: “We thank you God that we in our church are not like others. We don’t condone sin. We seek to have pure doctrine and practice according to Your Word. We’re not like the Catholics or the Methodists or other Lutherans.” Or maybe it’s more personal: “I thank you, Lord that I am not like other people in this sinful culture. I avoid sinful internet sites. I don’t hurt my family. I don’t use harmful drugs. I attend church and give offerings.”

What is wrong with these prayers? God does command us to keep His Word pure with no false teaching. He expects us to avoid internet sites that would lead us to sin. He does expect us to love our family and to support the work of the church. So what is the problem? It’s the same danger of the Pharisee. If we’re doing good things because we think it makes us righteous before God rather than trusting the work of Christ, and if we ignore that we are sinners, but think ourselves righteous on our own, then God does not consider us righteous. Remember, sin corrupts even our best efforts and makes them bad in God’s sight.

Jesus is the only reason that God accepts our efforts. He died and paid for the sin in our hearts that contaminates our efforts to serve God. He died for the sin when we neglect God’s law in order to keep our own laws that God never commanded. His sufferings and death erased God’s record of our sin. And His holy life makes us perfect in God’s sight. Because God sees Jesus when he looks at believers, our words and actions by faith please Him. God has declared us justified, not guilty, because of what Jesus did for us, so we want to serve our Lord with our offerings and efforts and we want to have everyone else know His saving truth. Because of Jesus, we do the difficult things like holding to God’s truth even if it is not popular or avoiding temptation in our entertainment. Knowing God’s mercy in Christ is the difference between these two sinners who went up to the temple to pray.

The irony in this lesson is that the man who thought of himself as a committed, churchgoing follower of God failed to understand repentance. But, the man who lived a sinful life understood what it meant to repent. **Second, this man, humbled before God, went home justified.** *“The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven... and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”* (v.13) He made no defense before God as judge. In our country, even the most obviously guilty criminals have a right to a defense in court. They can try to convince a jury that they are innocent. But in God’s courtroom, there are no lawyers, no technicalities and no miscarriages of justice. God has all the evidence before him. He knows all things that we’ve done, said, and thought.

The tax collector didn’t lie about his sinfulness. He understood that God’s verdict should be guilty as charged. So he pleaded for God’s mercy. Mercy is something unearned or deserved. It’s the feeling we have when we see of a tragedy on the news and donate to the Red Cross to help. God has had mercy on sinners. He knows that we deserve to die and go to hell, but he loves us and wants us to reach heaven.

In his mercy, God comes to us in his Word and tells us the good news of Christ’s sacrifice. His Gospel gives us faith to confess our sin and receive forgiveness. Repentance begins with a humble heart, honestly confessing that as sinners we cannot earn forgiveness. Then, repentance clings to Christ in faith. God doesn’t make excuses for our sins. He doesn’t say, “Well, I’m glad you’re trying.” God does something better. He declares us not guilty. He had His Son die to take away our sins. The Holy Spirit washed our sins away by connecting us to Christ in Baptism. God offers us the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as proof of our innocence. His justification is ours through faith!

No one who clings in faith to Jesus can say, “I thank you God that I’m better than all other people.” True faith prays: “Holy God you don’t give me what I deserve. I thank you God that you have had mercy on me, a sinner. You declared me not guilty. You forgave me in Christ! Thank you, Lord!” Jesus used irony to get people to see who they really are in God’s judgment. God cares about our hearts. He cares about our faith. No matter how sinful we have been, in Christ we will live with him forever. So, today, we admit our guilt and cling to God’s mercy in Christ. Sinners, you are justified in Christ! Go in peace!

Amen.