

“Not All Sinners are the Same”

St. Luke 18:14

August 23, 2020

SERMON 1930

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Our sermon text is from St. Luke 18:14, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I’ve often heard someone say, “Everyone is a sinner.” As a self-standing statement, that is true. All who are born after Adam and Eve have inherited original sin. But why would someone say that? The implication is that all sinners are the same, and thus should be treated the same.

In today’s Holy Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a pharisee and a tax collector. There is one thing which they both share. They are sinners. Nevertheless, not all sinners are the same. Jesus tells us, “...this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.” Both sinners? Yes. Treated the same? No. Why? Not all sinners are the same.

In this parable Jesus speaks of two kinds of sinners. Although not included in this parable, **I can think of another kind of sinner**, which is mentioned in the Scriptures in other places. **In this sermon, I’m going to describe the kind of sinner not mentioned by Jesus, first.** This sinner is the openly rebellious and immoral sinner. This person makes no attempt to keep the law. They do what they want, when they want to do it. Usually we speak of these wicked people as living in their sin. They call good evil and evil good. They show no remorse as they lust to fulfill the desires of the flesh. This sinner doesn’t know his sin or doesn’t care.

The reason Jesus seldom mentions this openly rebellious sinner is because no one would mistake this sinner as righteous or pleasing to God. Their actions go against the law of God. Those who transgress the commandments are under God’s wrath and deserving of punishment. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, St. Paul speaks in a way that he assumes the Christian has the Scriptural knowledge that the openly rebellious sinner is rejected by God. He says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”

The second kind of sinner is shown us in the person of the tax collector. **This type of sinner has come to know his sinfulness through the second use of the law.** The law of God serves as a mirror to show him his sin. This second type of sinner might have been an openly rebellious and immoral sinner, but then he was shown his

sin by means of the law. St. Paul tells us in Romans 7, “ ... I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” ... 13... But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful” (Romans 7:7-13).

There is one more thing needed in order to be a part of this second class of sinner. This tax collector has come to faith in Jesus Christ through the forgiveness-promised salvation. He is a true Christian. He is declared righteous and will receive eternal life. It was the Gospel which created in him faith, that is trust in the mercy of God. Although sin deserves punishment and the wages of sin is death, this tax collector had come to believe that God would be merciful to him, a sinner. There is no doubt in his mind, that he will not be punished, but forgiven.

Thus this sinner both knows His sin and the mercy which He is received from God. The openly rebellious didn't know his sin and thus had no need for a Gospel promise, whether he heard of it or not. But this tax collector knows both his sin and the promised mercy given because of God's Son. We can see in the tax collectors' prayer that he has combined both a knowledge of sin and the forgiving mercy of God. He said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Through faith in God's mercy, which is firmly located in the suffering and death of God's Son, the tax collector desires to please God by His works. The forgiven tax collector does not return to his sinful life, but goes down to his house justified. With sins forgiven, the tax collector lives a life of good works out of thankfulness for the mercy he has received.

The third kind of sinner is portrayed by the Pharisee. This sinner has outwardly progressed in respectable works far beyond the first immoral sinner. This man has used the law as a direction for how to become righteous. When we speak of works-righteousness this is what we mean. Outwardly, the Pharisee follows the law. He trusts in his works to save him.

It is difficult at times to tell the difference between the second and third kind of sinner because both do good works. When Jesus encountered this type of sinner in Matthew 5, he told them, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that...” (Matthew 5:27-28). Jesus corrects their misinterpretation of the law. The Pharisee mistakenly thinks that he has kept the law and become righteous by his works.

Today's Old Testament reading presents to us the account of Cain and Abel. Like today's Holy Gospel, there are two men: a second class sinner and a third class sinner. Cain and Abel both build an altar and both offer a sacrifice. It is Abel that is justified, while Cain is rejected.

Last of all, we see the how Cain despised Abel and considers him to be far below himself. The Pharisee, too, has a high opinion of himself. He exalts himself and despises others.

This third class of sinner is a false Christian or false believer. To the world, he is wonderful and most worthy of heaven. But to God, the Pharisee is condemned and going to hell. God knows the truth. The pharisee is a cheap imitation of the real thing. **This parable is designed to show the false thinking of human reason, especially as it contrasted with God's declaration of the truth.** According to God the tax

collector is declared righteous through faith in Christ and the pharisee is condemned for his sin. God's declaration is what matter.

Jesus provides us this parable not so that we can judge our neighbor. It is impossible for us to see who does and does not have faith. Furthermore, it is not our job to detect false faith. Instead, Jesus wants us to have the genuine righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, and not the false and hypocritical righteousness of the pharisee. **Jesus provides this parable so that we can judge ourselves.**

The problem is that our sinful nature continues to fight against faith in Jesus Christ. **One of the ways** in which this happens, is when **we compare ourselves with the openly rebellious and immoral sinner.** This comparison leads us to be content with living the outwardly respectable life of the Pharisee, who does works without repentance or faith in Jesus Christ. The world cares nothing about faith and thus brags about Pharisees. In fact, the world would be a much better place if there were more pharisees, who strive to keep the Ten Commandments. **Nevertheless, the Pharisee is not truly righteous.**

Do not fool yourself into thinking that all sinners are the same. They are not. Cain was rejected and Abel was received into an eternal dwelling. The tax collector went home justified, but the pharisee remained in his sin. **Though all have sinned, they are not all treated the same in the end.**

There is no danger in mistaking an immoral profligate to be someone accepted by God. However, we do live in a world in which openly immoral and unnatural behavior, and even offensive behavior is being held up as good. Sad to say, there are so called "Christian" church leaders who hold that the Scriptures never really claimed to condemn lustful adultery, hateful and lying words, covetous desires, or destructive actions. Despite this smoke-screen, I would still say that the society's general consciousness still knows that those who do this are not being true. They are not being faithful to the tradition. There is a reason that it is newsworthy to tell about, let's say, a Christian nudist colony. Protest all you want that this is acceptable, those who are serious about the Christian faith, know that it is not right.

The great danger to our faith comes from being the Pharisee-kind of sinner. You can attend church. You can participate in worship and prayers. You can show us your "Christian" works. In fact, you can be so diligent in performing works, that you can far exceed the works of real Christians. Your outward appearance can fool many others and give the impression that you are a Christian.

The process for determining who is saved is quite simple. First, the person confesses their sins. Second, the person trusts in Christ. With the tax collector, we have someone who having come to the knowledge of his sins as well as the knowledge of the mercy provided in Christ. Following his conversion, a real faith produces good works. This tax collector does not return to his sinfulness. He does not continue to lead a sinful life. This tax collector goes home to do good works of thankfulness. And thus the life of good works includes a continual life of confession and trust in Christ for forgiveness.

With the Pharisee, he skips over sorrow over sin and trust in God. He produces good works, not out of thankfulness, but in order to earn his salvation. The Pharisee does not confess his sins. In fact, he is sure that he is not like other men. The Pharisee does not trust in God's Son through whom is salvation. The Pharisee presents to God his good works as the payment price for his salvation. HE is not thanking God for a gift he has received. His words couched in terms of thanking God, are only a veiled attempt to exalt himself.

We are to model our Christian life after the tax collector. After all he is the one who is justified or declared righteous. His words show that he has combined the knowledge of sin and the knowledge of God's mercy. We are to know that we are like other men—that is, we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. God does not wink at sin—it brings out his wrath and punishment. Nevertheless, we are to know that our God is forgiving us and receiving us back into his graces. He will not punish us, but have mercy on us. We are to know that in Christ we are forgiven. We are to leave behind our old life and not live in it. We have a new spirit within us. We show our love for God by hearing His Word and receiving His sacraments. We confess our sins and trust in God's mercy in Christ. We pray and are diligent to profess the Christian faith. We love our neighbor and seek his benefit. Our life is summed up, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."