

SERMON FOR TRINITY XI – AUGUST 15, 2021 – LUKE 18:9-14

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

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

Amen.

“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.” Thus far our text.

When reading a daily devotional, the writer recounted a small child’s definition of a saint. He said that a saint is, “A person whom the light shines through.” The child was most likely thinking about the stained glass windows he had seen, and compared that image with what he thought that saints were really like. But, this isn’t far from the truth. Saints of God are only saints because of the work that God does within them – the light that shines through (the good actions) are birthed from God, not from within themselves. As we think of those who have gone before us in the faith, that have passed away, the list of people is quite long, and quite interesting at the same time. First to come to mind, we talk about Jesus’ disciples, including John, Peter and Paul. They certainly were true believers in Christ and His life, death and resurrection for the sake of all men, and wrote

copiously about Him. The light of Christ certainly shone through them. However, they weren't sinless in their own lives – they daily sinned against God, just as we do. Look at Paul – he was killing Christians as a devout Jew, before the Holy Spirit converted his heart on the road to Damascus. Peter was referred to by Jesus as Satan just after his wonderful confession of the truth about Jesus being the Christ. John referred to himself as the lowest of all men, and did not count himself as worthy of being the writer of the Gospel account that the Holy Spirit brought about through his pen. Look at Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the Church that we talked about a little bit last week. He struggled throughout his life with doubts about his faith in Christ, and only was able to find solace in the truth that God is merciful, and works through the actions of sinful men, including himself.

Like the apostles, Luther knew that the light of Christ that shone through him did not originate with himself, but with God. Luther never wanted to exalt himself, but wrote of the truth of God's Word, and signed his writings, "To God be the Glory – *Solo Deo Gloria.*" What these men had in common was their humility, and their realization that they were only the great "pillars of the faith" by the grace of God. They had the attitude of the tax collector in the parable Jesus tells in Luke chapter 18, that of feeling unworthy of approaching God on their own. However, through God's alien work among us through Christ, they were forgiven just as we are, and empowered to write the blessed truth of the Scriptures to those of us living today. God wants us to have this attitude of humility that the tax collector did, and to flee from the arrogance and self-importance that the Pharisee personified in this example. He works in our hearts daily to crucify this sinful flesh that would have us exalt ourselves and our own works over those of God, and places humble,

child-like faith in its place. It is a miracle of the largest proportions, this conversion and change that God effects in our hearts. It truly shows His love for us, and empowers us to follow Him every day.

So, why do we persist in our sinful rebellion against God, and act like the sinful Pharisee? Why do we resist giving the credit for the light shining through us to the One to Whom it belongs – God alone?! The short answer is that the sinful nature that clings to us like glue causes us to remain bold and arrogant, and to deny the truth that all that is good in us comes from God. Every thought, word and deed that we say, do and think is a product of our sinful, fleshly lust for sin. Sin seems attractive – we are conditioned to strive for it because of our sinful nature. The only answer and solution to this is God – certainly not us!

But, the world around us wants us to justify ourselves. How many times have we said, either aloud or to ourselves, “At least I’m not as bad as my brother over here, or I haven’t done this or that bad thing.”? This is ultimately using the measuring stick of the sinful world that we live in to determine whether or not we are good enough to get into heaven. But, this isn’t the one that God will use for those who remain under the law. He says, “I the LORD your God am holy. As I am holy, so must you be holy.” We must measure up to every commandment of God, and not mess up at one point. Otherwise, we will be cast into hell eternally. It doesn’t matter whether or not we are better than our neighbor – we do not measure up to God’s standard, which is what really matters.

Another thing that we do when we are considering our sinful condition, is that we tick off on our fingers the wonderful things that we do for others. Helping little old ladies cross the street is the stereotypical Boy Scout good deed, but this doesn’t matter when it

comes to our spiritual condition. Giving money to the church is a great thing if it is done for the right reason, but gives false security if it is done out of guilt or anticipated eternal benefit. None of these things matter much, if our heart is devoted to ourselves and the sinful world that we live in, rather than heaven to come.

This is the only way to “save our self-respect”, we think. We want to do something to save ourselves – if we think about the fact that there is nothing that we can do, and forget about our Savior, we can easily be driven to despair. When someone is sick in our society, and they are someone that we love, one of the first things out of our mouths is, “What can I do to help?” This is our knee-jerk reaction, if you will, to a problem that we are presented with. We want to be pro-active, and solve the situation as quickly as possible. This is not a bad thing in an earthly situation, where there is indeed something that we can do. But, when it pertains to heavenly things, there is indeed NOTHING that we can do.

There is NOTHING that we can do to save ourselves on our own. The only thing that we can do is to believe in Jesus Christ as our only hope for salvation. We know that we are unfit to approach God on our own – that’s why Christ died in our place. He came to us when we could not come to Him, and His love propelled Him to the cross of Calvary, and kept Him there amidst much suffering and pain. In God’s eyes, on the last day, He will see the merits of Christ, and count them as if we did them. This is not fair! We didn’t do the deeds – why should we receive credit for them? God’s love for us sinful men causes the merits of Christ to be credited to our account, and only His love causes it to happen. Nothing that we have done, but everything that Christ has done, causes us to be saved. To believe anything else is false!

Just like the tax collector, we regret and mourn our sinful condition. But, God turns our mourning into dancing. Once we have been brought to the realization of our sinful condition, and are told the wonderful Good News of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, then we are freed from our prison of guilt and sin, and restored to heaven's glory with God. We pray that God would continue the work that He started within us at our Baptism – to strengthen us in the true faith, and urge good works to proceed from us out of His motivation, and not ours. Good works aren't bad – in fact, they are wonderful. But, they are only wonderful if they come from the motivation of God; otherwise, they are selfishly motivated.

Along with this wonderful gift of forgiveness comes the promise of God. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled (condemned in their persistent sins), but those who humble themselves will be exalted. This humbling occurs at the work and word of God – He enables us to be penitent, and leads us to this point. But, we also have the hope of heaven, that someday we will be in heaven, where the sinful urges within us will be gone forever. We will be in the presence of God eternally, where there is no more temptation, pain or suffering. We look forward to that day, and this hope keeps us going in a world that often doesn't have much hope to go around. This is spelled out for us in this text, and is given to the tax collector who is given the power by God to remain humble.

What about the saints that we mentioned earlier in this sermon? How were they so special, and how did they earn the blessings of God? Nothing that they did merited the tremendous blessings they received from God. They were sinful and unclean men, just like we are. They sinned every day against God's will, and repented just like we do. What caused them to be reckoned by God as saints was their great faith in His promises.

Ultimately, then, what God praised in them was what He put there in the first place – nothing within them, but everything that is a part of Him. He praised the light that shone through them, which ultimately emanated from Himself. The saints certainly weren't like the Pharisee, putting all of their good deeds on display, and showing the world how good they were. Rather, as Paul says, his goal was to “preach Christ and Him crucified.” This single-minded focus characterizes the writings and ministries of all of the saints of God. They were like the tax collector – not feeling able to approach God on their own, but humbly depending upon the grace and mercy of God every day of their lives. They were given the gift as well of being so humble, all from the gracious mercy and love of God.

We recount the wonderful blessings that God has given to each of us, including the pillars of the faith who have gone before us chronologically. God truly is faithful, and gives us great gifts of faith in Him every day of our lives. He gradually and daily makes us into His saints, and blesses us with His love to overcome our sinful pride and exalting of ourselves over and above Him. Even though the world around us would tell us to “sell ourselves well”, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to show us the folly of this thinking, by showing us the futility of living by the law, and the blessedness of living by the Gospel. Like the prophets and evangelists in the Scriptures, and the Reformers of the 16th century, we are all saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and by no other means do we have the hope of heaven. To think otherwise is to fall into the error of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, and think of ourselves more highly than we ought to. The Holy Spirit gives us the gift of the attitude of the tax collector, and forgives our many sins when we confess them to Him. He doesn't want us to be driven to despair; rather, He drives us to Himself every day to receive our sustenance and strength to live on in this

world of sin and death. The promised deliverance from this sinful world is not too far away – it will come in God’s time, which is always right. He will give us the power to remain steadfast in Him until our earthly death. Just remember that we are ALL saints of Christ – by His work and not ours. Even when we don’t do or say or think things that we think are “saintly”, as we will every day, the fact that we are the saints of God has nothing to do with us, but everything to do with God. He loves us so much that He puts up with even our sinful arrogance, for the sole purpose of saving us, His children. What a gracious God we serve! He has made us His children, totally out of His love. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.