

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
20 August, Anno Domini 2023
St. Luke 18:9-14

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

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

There is a reason that religions of the law are more “successful” than the true Christian religion. You can measure obedience. If you tell me that in order to either be saved or be sure that I am saved I just need to speak more kindly to my wife, be more responsible with my money, go to church more often, or take a mission trip to Africa, I can get on board with that. I can check off the boxes, and, VOILA, I’m done or, at least, I’m doing better. We want to hear: “Do this and you will live.”

Thus, the Pharisee, knowing the Law of God along with all of the prescribed traditions of the fathers, had striven mightily to follow them. And, indeed, he had done them...outwardly. And, what he had done was good. We are commanded by God not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to cheat people as tax collectors were known for doing. Fasting and giving back to God generously are godly and to be commended. These are all things we should be striving to do ourselves. The Pharisee believed he had done what he was supposed to do and that he had made himself pleasing to God, that he was righteous because he was doing good things, he was avoiding bad things, he was checking off the boxes. And, certainly, if you had known the Pharisee, you would have believed that he was a righteous and godly man.

Conversely, the true Christian religion which proclaims that it is impossible for a man to make himself righteous by anything he does, which offers righteousness and assurance completely apart from works of the Law, apart from anything you can do or contribute, is not very satisfying if you imagine that you can be saved by self-improvement. But Holy Scripture clearly teaches that “by works of the Law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” (Rom. 3:20) Rather, we are saved purely by the gracious forgiveness of Jesus. It is His works and His words that save us. There is no work good enough that it could ever merit the forgiveness of our sins. Thus, there is nothing for a person to DO to be saved. Only believe that Jesus has already done it for you. Receive the mercy of God which He bestows upon you in His Word and through Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Believe His absolution. Believe that He

died for you, that His Blood was the full and sufficient atonement for your sins. But you can't measure faith. You can't even check off faith as a work you've done because faith itself is a gift given by God through the Holy Spirit.

And so, the Pharisee went home, but not justified. How do we know? Because the Lord Jesus told us, the one who knows the heart, the one who makes righteous, the one who will judge the living and the dead. The Pharisee wanted none of God's mercy, none of His forgiveness. He refused to believe that he needed any of it. But didn't matter how good he thought he was. It doesn't matter how good you think you are, works that do not proceed from faith are not good works in God's sight. They may benefit your neighbor but they anger God because they are done in place of Jesus.

This is why some walk through those doors and walk right back out never to return. They are not satisfied with mercy. They don't want to confront the reality that they, like us, are rotten sinners to the core, who can't claim anything good as having come from themselves. They want an instructional lesson that they can go implement and feel good about. They want to feel like a different person when they walk out. And we know that's true because we know that our own sinful flesh wants the exact same thing. We don't want to confess that even though we probably haven't committed any grave outward sins such as murder or having an affair or robbing a bank, we are still guilty and deserve the same eternal wrath of God for our anger, our lustful thoughts, our failure to pray, and our covetous desires. Part of us wants to come to church to feel better about ourselves and get our good works batteries charged up so that we can do good things during the coming week.

But notice something about both the tax collector and the Pharisee. At the end of the parable, there is no outward difference between the two men. Neither looks or sounds or even is different in any way that we can measure. Yet Jesus tells us that there is a very profound difference - the tax collector stands justified by God, forgiven of all of his sins, while the Pharisee is a condemned man, walking out of the temple under God's temporal and eternal wrath. The Pharisee despised both God and his neighbor by imagining that HE did not need God's mercy, the very purpose of the temple and the sacrifices. He loved himself and his good works and decided that he didn't need anything from God, most especially, mercy. But mercy is exactly what the tax collector came hungering for. He knew there was nothing good in him to recommend him to God. There was no use listing all the sins because there were far, far too many count. But that didn't stop him. He sought God's mercy, he dared to ask for forgiveness because God had promised to hear

and answer all who called upon Him seeking mercy and help in their time of need. Nothing but mercy would suffice and mercy is exactly what the tax collector received.

You may not feel any different when you walk back out through those doors. But you can walk out in the assurance that Christ has forgiven your sins, even if you can't tell the difference. God sees the difference. God sees that you are cleansed and forgiven. God sees that though your sins are as scarlet, He has made them white in the Blood of the Lamb. The true Christian faith is about the assurance of God's promises. God speaks and gives water and bread and wine with His Word so that you have perfect works, God's works, to cling to. Our works are fickle and filled with impurities. His are sure and endure forever. What you find in His holy temple, what you find in Christ Jesus, is everything He gives that you may know that your sins are forgiven, that He has had mercy upon you, a sinner.

You will see the difference as the fruits of Christ's forgiveness begin to pour out in your life. Where once you were dead in your sin and your trespasses, now you will be filled with the Holy Spirit who will work on and move your will to desire and do what is good and God-pleasing. You can be sure that when the tax collector got home, people began to notice something different about him. In faith, he would have longed to make right what he could and like Zacchaeus, would have begun returning fourfold what he had taken. He would have proclaimed the great mercy of God who had forgiven him. Likewise, when your faith in Christ and His mercy have been nurtured, you will begin to think and walk and talk differently. You will begin to love the commandments of God and want to walk according to them. This is the fruit of true faith that trusts alone in Christ's merit for eternal life.

But, beware, all you who trust in yourselves that you are righteous and look down on the sinners who surround you. You will have no peace and no rest because your righteousness is not righteousness at all. It is death. It condemns you.

Trust alone in Christ. Let Him be your hope, your righteousness, your salvation. Rejoice in Him and all that He has done for you. Gather here before Him not to prove that you don't need Him, but to cry out to Him and receive the peace and life that He loves to give in abundance to poor, miserable sinners, like us.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer(We stand.) The peace of God which passes understanding keep your hearts through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.