

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
11 August, Anno Domini 2024
St. Luke 18:9-14

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

Children of God,

The account of Cain's fratricide of his brother Abel is brief but truly horrific. In a few words the Holy Spirit lays out very clearly the great evil and end of self-righteousness and personal exaltation. Cain's pride and arrogance ended up driving him to such a deep hatred of his brother that Cain rose up against him and murdered him. We may think that our pride is harmless. We may even think, as the world tells us, that pride is good and teach our children to think the same. Buyer beware. Learn from Cain. What began as pride ended in eternal damnation.

Cain's eternal judgment began, of course, with what we see in Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee thought quite a lot of himself. Not only his words but even how he conducted himself in God's presence reveal how proud he was of his own goodness. He assumed, on the basis of the self-proclaimed righteousness which he had worked hard to cultivate, that God was pleased with him and would grant him a share in the company of the blessed. How wrong he was. Can you imagine the shock of those listening to Jesus who hear that this clearly good man is not justified before God? They understood the implication. This man was going to hell! God hated this man rather than the nasty tax collector who enriched himself at the expense of his fellow Jews, collecting taxes for the pagan Romans and adding a healthy service charge to line his own pockets!

Now, maybe that last statement sounds a little harsh even to your ears. God is love. How can you say he hates? Hear the word of the Lord from Psalm 11 "The Lord tests the righteous; but His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence." (Psalm 11:5) This does not negate God's love for all men or His fervent desire that they be saved. What it makes clear is that the terrible wrath of God awaits those who puff

themselves up in His presence either in their hearts or their minds or their bodies, who do not acknowledge the wickedness of their hearts or the repulsive nature of their lust and covetousness and greed; or their low and dismissive view of God's Word, the washing of Baptism, and the saving food of Christ's Body and Blood. Such an attitude says to God "I don't need you."

The hatred of God for those who reject His Word is not His proper work. It is not the work He delights in. God's wrath and judgment are His alien work, necessitated by man's rebellion and unbelief. It is the height of all hubris to imagine that anything we do, even the most pious and holy appearing, is even close to good enough to be considered holy as God is holy. Do we think that it is for no reason that Isaiah says that the very best of our works are like filthy, disgusting rags before God? What foolishness then to take pride in such things and then hold them up before God and say "These are so good that you should reward me for them!" If we somehow were able to manage to keep a single commandment with the purity of heart demanded by the Law and God's own holiness, we have done nothing more than what we are supposed to do as those created by God in His image. Would we not find it ridiculous if our coworker expected a raise and a party for doing the work they were hired to do? We mock the younger generations who get on TikTok and whine about not getting high praise and gold stars every time they do their job and yet that is precisely what we do before God. We act as though every even sort of keeping of a commandment should impress God and we should be duly rewarded with riches and an less suffering. We act as though we have gone above and beyond when, in reality, the sheer fact that we take note of our works let alone try to pat ourselves on the backs for them expose the dual reality that our trust is not in the Blood of the Lord Jesus for our salvation and that instead of actually loving our neighbor we are just using him as a stepping stone to get to heaven.

And where does such an attitude lead? It leads us to look at our neighbor like Cain looked at Abel and like the Pharisee looked at the tax collector - with contempt. We imagine that we are better than they are and more deserving of God's love because we have worked harder and our deeds are shinier. When we see our brother in his sin and brokenness we jump to conclusions about why he is suffering and excuse ourselves for not helping him bear his burden because he probably deserves it. We rejoice that

we haven't made such stupid decisions and have lives that are clearly more put together and Christian. Our blood boils over the drug addicts, the politicians convicted of taking bribes, spoiled celebrities and athletes, the homeless camps, and the trans activists. We are proud of ourselves for not being so gross or greedy. We mock them and clap our hands when they fall. We love seeing people fall and get what they deserve - a DUI, a felony conviction, their tents torn down. It's what they deserve. Justice needs to be served. "I'm just glad I'm not like them. I'm a good person!"

Repent. Your heart has been filled with the same contempt and hatred toward your neighbor as Cain and the Pharisee. Let's be clear. There is no difference before God between what Cain did in actually beating his brother to death and the Pharisee hating the tax collector and standing on the tax collector to make himself look better before God. Both are murderous. Both break the Fifth Commandment. Both are utter rejections of the salvation which God has prepared for us by spilling the Blood of Jesus on the ground to pay for our sin.

The Pharisee and Cain both rejected the mercy of God because they thought they had no need of it. They were good enough - Cain because he was the firstborn son of Adam and Eve, he was the one of whom Eve declared in great hopefulness "I have gotten a man, the Lord."; and the Pharisee because he was so pious and good and had gone above and beyond the requirements of the Law. Why should they need forgiveness? They trusted whole-heartedly in themselves, that they were righteous in and of themselves. They needed nothing from God and so the very suggestion that they should need His mercy and forgiveness was not only absurd but offensive.

Thus they hated the true God because He was the one who said "Apart from me you can do no good thing," "There is no one who is righteous, no, not one," and "Every intention of man's heart is only evil from his youth." Cain and the Pharisee could not bear such things to be said of them. God was lying. They were good. Indeed they were their own saviors, their own gods. They would not be told what they could and couldn't do, what they should and shouldn't do. "Who needs God when I have me?"

This is why the world hates the Word of God and even the Gospel. Both are rooted in the reality that man, apart from the Holy Spirit and apart from Christ, is evil. Both

make clear that our thinking, our feelings, and our desires have all be completely corrupted by sin and are offensive to God.

Why then, were Abel and the tax collector justified? It's certainly not because they brought a better quality sacrifice, better works, to God. They most certainly couldn't. They openly believed that and confessed it. They believed that they had nothing to offer God, that they were wretched sinners who had nothing to commend themselves to God. And, consequently, they believed the promise of God that He would have mercy upon those who stood before Him in repentant humility, who trusted God's Word that He gladly forgives sins for the sake of His Son. Abel and the tax collector neither took pride in their sin nor did they, in pride, imagine that their sin was greater than God's mercy. They put all their hope and confidence in the Blood of the Messiah, the one who makes atonement, propitiates, for our sin. That is why they were justified.

Dear sinners washed in the Blood of Jesus, keep a close watch on your heart that the very dangerous seeds of pride are not able to take root in you. If you must boast, boast in the Lord Jesus Christ who suffered your death and judgment so that you might be justified, declared innocent, and brought into the gracious presence of God. Never boast in yourself, for what are you? What do you have that has not been given to you? Do not exalt yourself over your neighbor or look upon him with contempt. Before God, you are no different. You and he need the same mercy. If you find yourself in a better condition right now, help your neighbor. Show him mercy and compassion as freely and joyfully as it has been shown to you by God.

You are not here today to show God or anyone else how good you are and how little you need mercy. True Christian worship of God is not praising God for being so big and awesome and powerful. Nor is it about God making you feel better about yourself, telling you that you aren't as sinful as you think you are. True Christian worship is to stand before God as a beggar and receive from Him all the mercy and goodness He has promised. It is to be justified by the one who is just and who shed His Blood to atone for you. It is to confess "Yes, Lord, you are right when you say that I should be condemned eternally for my sin. That I know is true. But you are the God who pardons sin. You have declared yourself to be the God who forgives those

who confess their sins and want to do better. I take you at your Word that Jesus is my salvation, that His good and saving work has atoned for my evil and selfish work. I believe You when You say through Your servant ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ I believe you when you tell me that Baptism now saves me by washing away the guilt of my sin and bestowing a clean conscience. I believe You when You say that under such insignificant things as bread and wine you feed us with the sacrifice of propitiation, the true Body and Blood of Jesus which forgives all my sin.”

In Christ Jesus, God has justified you. He has made you holy and righteous and good and pleasing to God. Depart in peace.

In the Name of Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.