

Trinity 11 - 09/01/2019

Text: Luke 18:9-14

In the early 1900's, the *London Times* newspaper asked several famous authors to submit essays on the question, "What is wrong with the world?" Now, if you were asked that question today, what would you answer? Islamic terrorism? Rampant drug use and abuse? More and more violent crime? The breakdown of the family? Increasing isolation and loneliness?

Well, one of the authors, a man named G.K. Chesterton, wrote in response to the question "What is wrong with the world?" "Dear sirs, I am. Yours truly, G.K. Chesterton." Now he could have said many things. But Chesterton, a Christian, knew what was what, and by God's grace he had the humility to say it: "I am" what's wrong.

Today we hear a parable from our Lord Jesus about those who would answer the question "What is wrong with the world" in two different ways. One would say some variation of "I may not be perfect, but..." and then list all the ways that he or she is at least not the biggest problem. The other would say, "I am." The parable is about spiritual pridefulness.

Now what exactly is spiritual pridefulness? Well, let's start with standard-issue pride. What is that? The dictionary definition positively states it as, "A sense of one's own proper dignity or value; self-respect." When does someone become *prideful*, though? When that sense of value becomes haughty, when someone values themselves over others; or sometimes we'll say, "he values himself *too highly*"; "he thinks too highly of himself."

When it comes to spiritual things, now we're talking about someone's dignity or value spiritually speaking; that is, truly, value before God. To be spiritually prideful is to think too highly of oneself; to think oneself higher or better or more valuable than another, before God.

The Pharisee assesses himself: "**I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.**" Frankly, there's nothing wrong with this. The problem with the Pharisee is not his fasting or his tithing. It's not in the strength that enabled him to resist taking advantage of his neighbors, or to resist adultery, or giving in to greed. The problem here is that the Pharisee thinks that he is righteous enough; spiritually strong enough to earn God's favor; and that whatever his faults and weaknesses are, they are insignificant compared to other people's faults and weaknesses. Therefore, he is the best candidate to receive God's love and favor. "Chief of sinners though I be, that guy sure is worse than me."

That is spiritual pride. Or as Luke puts it: he is one who trusts in himself that he is righteous, and treats others with contempt.

The Pharisee truly lives a good life. He avoids evil, does good, gives away his possessions, trains his flesh for hardship. He avoids sin and he is the better for it: there is no real or lasting pleasure in sin. Don't believe me? Pick a rock star and read his biography. Debauchery doesn't lead to happiness. The Pharisee knows this. He has much to be thankful for in this good life that God has blessed him to lead.

But anyone who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall. The Pharisee outwardly looks holy and righteous – we tend to think of them as the “bad guys” in these stories but the fact is that *everyone* would have looked up to them. When Jesus says to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees” that would have been a shockingly scandalous statement to hear, because the Pharisees were the spiritual superstars of the time.

Anyways, the Pharisee looks holy and righteous outwardly, but inside he is nothing but a rotting maggot-sack of sin and death. And don't you think better of yourself right now, because you're nothing better than that, too. Likewise the tax collector, who had lived his own life of sin and debauchery, extorting his own neighbors, living the high life on the backs of all those from whom he collected taxes. The point is this: we ought not trust in ourselves for anything, spiritually speaking, because we are rotten to the core.

Yet Jesus tells this story about these two rotten guys in the temple and one of them goes home justified. Top it all off, it's the guy that no one would expect.

If you get to pick what sort of a man to be between the Pharisee with honor in the community and a steady job and the Tax Collector of public shame and regret, pick the Tax Collector. For he went home justified. He confessed his sins before God. He trusted in God to cover for him, to receive him by grace, to forgive him. And God did.

Do you want to have worth and dignity before God? This only comes in the righteousness bestowed by Christ on sinners.

The Church has deliberately chosen the Tax Collector for her model of prayer. His actions in the parable are precisely why we typically bow our heads and close our eyes and fold our hands in prayer. We come before God as sinners in need of mercy. We want to go home justified. We do not

trust in ourselves or our works. We don't count ourselves as bad, but not as bad as that guy. No: "Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me." That's the truth.

There's a flip-side spiritual pride that is sometimes at work in the Church. This is the pride that sort of flaunts just how bad of a sinner we have been, maybe even still are, as a way to showcase just how great the grace and mercy of God are. But sin is harmful, and God explicitly warns us that we should not keep on sinning that grace may abound; likewise that we ought to be warring against sin and not boasting in it, even if it is to show forth the grace of God in Christ Jesus; and we ought not lead others into scandal or sin themselves by our lives.

Instead, we ought to look at that Tax Collector and see him doing nothing but in repentance coming to hear and taste and see God's mercy, and then going home. And when he goes home we would see him beginning to look, in an outward way, like the Pharisee. Not self-righteous or spiritually prideful, but instead loving the Lord's words and commandment and wanting to keep them. So he'd be fasting to train his flesh. He'd be tithing of all that he had in compassion for the poor and for the expansion of God's kingdom, but also to curb his flesh and not be tempted by the mammon. He would resist evil. He would do good.

And we know this to be the case, because even though this parable doesn't show this, another real-life story one chapter later in Luke's Gospel does. Zacchaeus, small of stature and climber of trees—and also a tax collector—receives Christ joyfully in his house and hears the wonderful news that he is forgiven and then in his new freedom pledges to give half of all his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold everything he had that was from dishonest gain. He bears fruit in keeping with repentance. **"Today salvation has come this house,"** says Jesus. Wonderful. Both tax collectors—sinners—are saved in their houses, that is, where they live.

And this Gospel changes them. They are not perfect, nor better than others. But they are saved and they have the abundant life that only comes from Jesus.

You are sinners. But Jesus has died for you, and today He announces through me that your sins are forgiven. He gives this meal to deliver to you His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. When you go home you go home justified, forgiven.

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

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