

In the same way, the only healing for our broken spirit is God's mercy, not our merits; God's grace, not our goodness; God's love, not our labors. The forgiveness we need for our sins isn't something that can be won from within. It's something that only God can accomplish for us, and that he did in Jesus. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).* Jesus didn't live, suffer, and die so that we, in turn, would go about life trying to earn our salvation. He won it for us, and God credits what Jesus accomplished for us through faith. That's what he told Abram in our First Lesson today. And so, the prayer of the tax collector is nothing more than a humble request for God to be merciful to him in Christ and forgive his sin.

Does God hear his prayer? And, more importantly, does he answer it? Does this man find healing for his broken spirit? Listen to Jesus. *"I tell you that this man...went home justified before God."* No big deeds, no costly payments, no lengthy prayers—just a plain and simple confession of sin and a plea for God's mercy. Or, better yet, faith—faith in Jesus, who lived, suffered, and died for our sins, and who then rose from the grave for our justification.

How beautifully the hymnist puts this, when he writes:

*Salvation unto us has come By God's free grace and favor.
Good works cannot avert our doom; They help and save us never.
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, Who did for all the world atone;
He is the one Redeemer (CW 390:1).*

This is the spirit of the Lutheran Reformation. This is the truth that by God's grace Dr. Martin Luther restored to the church some 499 years ago. Today we celebrate the truth that we are saved by God's grace alone, by our Spirit-worked faith alone, and by God's inspired Scripture alone. As we stand before God, we all stand alike. As someone once said, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. In terms of the law, we're all equally sinful and need Jesus as our Savior. In terms of the gospel, we're all equally loved by God and forgiven of our sins. *It Really Is a Small World After All*, isn't it?

And so, when we ask, *Who Is This Man?* we answer: He is Jesus, our Redeemer. He's the Son of God and the Son of Man. He's the One sent from heaven above to seek and to save the lost. It's in this Jesus that we find forgiveness for our sin and healing for our broken spirit. Fellow heirs of the Reformation, believe it, treasure it, defend it, and share it! Amen.

Luke 18:9-14 – Who Is This Man? – It's a Small World After All
10/30/16 – St. Paul, Muskego, WI – 753, 200, 390, 203
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Today we are celebrating the anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. It was 499 years ago that Dr. Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, an act of faith and courage that changed the course of the church for all time. One of the blessings of the Reformation—in fact, the greatest blessing of them all—is the truth that in Christ God declares us not guilty of our sins and invites us to share in a relationship with him that reaches all the way into eternity. The Apostle Paul understood this truth and in our Second Lesson today writes, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ep 2:8, 9).* And Jesus himself closes our text today by saying, *"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

There are many things that we can fake, aren't there? We can fake faith; we can fake hope; we can fake love. In fact, we can pretty much fake all of the Christian virtues. Humility, however, is not so easy to fake. There's a saying on the farm that, as the weeds and the wheat grow up together, they show which God has blessed. The ears of wheat humbly bow their heads, while the weeds lift their heads high above the wheat. But it's the wheat that God has blessed, not the weeds. In fact, the more fruitful the wheat, the fuller the head, the lower it bows itself to the ground.

That's the message of our text today. As we continue our *Who Is This Man?* series, we learn from Jesus the meaning and importance of humility for our salvation. On this Reformation Day let's pay close attention to this Man, for he teaches us about:

Living Humbly – The Wrong Way to Be Right

- 1. The proud boast of the Pharisee**
- 2. The humble request of the tax collector**

1. This is the second consecutive prayer-parable that Jesus tells, but this one is dramatically different than the former. The first, that of the persistent widow, is all about persistence; this one is all about justice. Notice to whom Jesus addresses his words. Luke begins, *"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable."* It's pretty obvious that Jesus is directing this parable to the Pharisees, for they seek to justify themselves in the eyes of everyone.

The customary times for prayer were mid-morning and mid-afternoon, 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. As the Pharisee prepares to pray, he struts up to the front of the temple. He doesn't really pray; he boasts. He boasts about himself, his works, and his moral superiority over others, specifically calling out *"this tax collector."* We heard last week how the Jews hated the tax collectors, and this Pharisee is no different. In addition, he boasts about fasting twice a week, while the law required only once a year, and he tithes way more than he's required to do. In short, by his boasting and bragging the Pharisee is nailing his own self-righteous theses to the temple doors, reminding God of how much he needs him.

The Pharisee's trying to be right, but he's going about it in the wrong way. He doesn't even know what being right is all about. He thinks it's something he has to do, something he has to work at, something within his ability to achieve. In two short verses he uses the word "I" four times. *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."*

Despite all his boasting, however, the Pharisee's biggest problem is his stubborn refusal to identify himself with others. *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people,"* he says. In his heart of hearts he refuses to acknowledge that he is like other people—conceived and born in sin. He's blind to what David had said years before: *"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me"* (Ps 51:5). Sadly, the Pharisee is worse than all the rest, for he's blind to his own sin—the sin he's inherited and the sins he's committed—and doesn't see his need for Jesus.

Now, before we denounce him and his self-righteous, arrogant attitude, let's remember that Pharisaism is not dead today. Inside every one of us lives a little Pharisee. We call it our Old Adam. Whenever we think highly of our own behavior, whenever we compare ourselves to others, whenever we try just a little bit harder to get right with God and think that he'll love us more for it, we've gone into the closet of self-righteousness and come out wearing our Pharisaical robes. It makes no difference how much self-righteousness we're wearing. If we're wearing any of it at all, we're wearing the wrong stuff. We're not relying 100% on God. And if we're not relying 100% on God, we're denying his grace and are lost. We're trying the wrong way to be right. For God inspired the Apostle Paul to write, *"All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God"* (Ga 3:10, 11).

And so, the Pharisee, who's proudly making his boasts before God, is trying the wrong way to be right. And, sad to say, Jesus says, he goes home unjustified, that is, unforgiven, before God.

2. How thankful we can be that this isn't where Jesus' parable ends. There's another guy in this story, and Jesus uses him to teach us the only way to be right with God. The tax collector speaks only seven words (six in the Greek) and says, *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."* His humble plea has come down to us in our liturgy (we still use it in our worship services today), and as he approaches God we note two things: he prays to the right person, and he prays for the right reason.

Jesus says that 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.'"* Here's a man who knows where to turn. Unlike the Pharisee, he's not praying to himself. He's praying to God, a God who's full of mercy and grace. Yes, he's sinned against others (as we heard last week), but he recognizes that, more than anything else, he's terribly offended God. And he understands that only God can forgive his sins. It's not enough to apologize to those against whom we've sinned. All sin is, first and foremost, an abomination in the sight of God and leaves a horrible stench in his nostrils. And so, we confess all our sins—known and unknown—to God, and we ask for his forgiveness. That's why God inspired the Apostle John to tell us: *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 Jn 1:8, 9). There's nothing fake about the tax collector's confession. He's begging God to be merciful to him and forgive his sins, something only God can do. He's come to the right person.

And he's praying for the right reason. He desperately needs mercy, God's kindness in not punishing sinners. His plea is a simple and straightforward one: *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."* He's not asking God to be fair with him. Had that been the case, God would have sent him to hell. That would have been fair, *"for the wages of sin is death"* (Ro 6:23). God tells us in his Word. No, he knows that the only possible healing for his broken spirit is God's mercy. For centuries before the Psalmist David had been inspired by God to write, *"Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit"* (Ps 32:1, 2).