

CONFESSION

Luke 18:9-17

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

October 23, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 18, verses 9 through 17. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 18, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Dear horrible people,

Rejoice! For your Father in heaven declares you righteous for Jesus' sake. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (18:14).

And we are horrible people. Let's be honest about that. We are horrible people. We speak the truth when we confess that, “We poor sinners ... are by nature sinful and unclean.” In fact, when we confess our sin in such absolute terms, there is nothing more true we could say about ourselves. Nothing else cuts to our core more than a confession of sin. I can say, “I am wearing a white shirt.” And that is 100% factually correct. But that's just a surface truth. But to confess that I am a poor sinner, and that I am by nature sinful and unclean, that cuts to the core of who I am. That is 100% factually correct, and it cuts to the core of my very being. So when we confess our sin, not merely that we commit sins, but also that our nature is sin, that is the truest thing we can say about ourselves.

We resist this. We might think, *I want church to be an uplifting experience*. And it is, but how we get there matters. In our hearts, we don't want to confess our sin. I mean, not really. We might be okay with reciting the confession of sin, because we've come to realize that it's pious to do so. But it easily becomes a matter of just going through the motions, because we don't want it to be anything more than that. We don't really want to expose our evil thoughts, words, and

CONFESSION (Luke 18:9-17)

deeds. And we don't really want to think about the corrupt nature of our hearts. But we need to. So we should honestly consider our sin when we come to confession.

That's why we take time for silent reflection before the confession of sin. Or sometimes we recite the Ten Commandments together. Because, when we get to the confession of sin, we should not merely recite the words of the confession. But we should have in our minds the actual sins we have committed against God. And we should see those sins as proof that our natures are sinful and unclean. When we get to the confession of sin, we need to be honest with ourselves. Dig up the dirt in your heart from the last week, or the last year, or the last decade, or however long ago you need to go back. Dig it up, and bring it with you. We feel like we should clean ourselves up before coming to church. And we feel like we should leave all of our garbage outside. We think, *This is the place of God, and God is clean, and God is righteous*. So Church might be the last place we feel comfortable digging up our dirt. But, in reality, it is the first place, and we should feel most comfortable with it here, because we have the promise of God that he will "forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

We like to hide our sins. We've been doing this since the Garden of Eden, when the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking in the cool of the day, so they hid themselves among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8). They did not want God to see them, because they knew they were guilty, and they felt shame. Shame is pain over the way other people see us. So it causes us to hide from God. And it causes us to hide from other people.

Shame is one of the main causes of broken relationships. This happens in marriages, friendships, and all sorts of relationships. You commit a sin against the other person. And they might forgive you, or they might let it go. But there's still something wrong. It's shame. When you look at the person you have sinned against, you feel pain over all the ways you have sinned against them. And we don't want to feel that pain, so we hide from them. And we might even abandon them. Another way we hide our sin is by fighting. If we can pin some blame on the other person, we can hide our sin. It's so twisted; we fight the hardest when we know we are wrong. That's the effect shame has on us.

In order to fight this shame, we need to confess our sins. And I don't just mean confessing your sins to God in private prayer. That's good, and we should do that every day. But if we only confess our sins in secret, it's too easy for our minds to think that no one can hear us, including God. So when you confess your sins in private prayer, try naming them out loud. And I mean specific sins. Confess, out loud, exactly what you did. It might feel uncomfortable, but it's good for you.

I would even suggest that you go to private confession. Lutherans still do this. It's in the Small Catechism. If you're curious, you can find it on page 102 of the hymnal. Confess your sins to God, in the presence of a pastor, and he will declare God's forgiveness to you. It is liberating to name your sins out loud in the presence of another person, and then hear, out loud, God's forgiveness of those very same sins. It doesn't make your sins more forgiven. When your sin is forgiven, it stays forgiven. But it helps us get used to forgiveness, so that our shame before God, which should not exist anymore, begins to lose its power. And then this can even help in our relationships. It helps us to forgive, and it helps us become more comfortable with receiving forgiveness, so that we can confess our sins to the people we sin against. And we can even believe that they might forgive us.

CONFESSION (Luke 18:9-17)

In this parable Jesus compares a Pharisee and a tax collector. And he especially compares the way they pray. Now, the Pharisee and the tax collector really have a lot in common. But they are vastly different in the way they view themselves and in the way others view them.

Pharisees in that day were highly respected. From our perspective today, if you are familiar at all with the Pharisees, you might not have much respect for them. That's because they were often on the receiving end of Jesus' criticism, so that's how we see them. But they were generally respected in their day. They lived morally upright lives, and many of them were teachers of God's Law. So they were admired, and people looked to them for guidance. Tax collectors were on the other side of the spectrum. If you think tax collectors don't get much respect today, the mood in ancient Israel was even worse. That's because Israel was not a sovereign nation at the time. They were under control of the Roman Empire. So instead of collecting taxes for a government by the people, for the people, they were collecting taxes for a foreign government, and many of the Jews did not appreciate their Roman overlords. So any Jew who collected taxes was viewed as a sort of traitor. To make matters worse, tax collectors had a reputation for extortion. They could overcharge you and keep the excess for themselves (e.g., Luke 3:12). We don't know if this tax collector did that, but that would certainly go through the minds of Jesus' audience when they hear this parable. So these two men were viewed in vastly different ways by the general public.

They both go to the temple to pray. And they both stand by themselves, but for very different reasons. The Pharisee stands by himself in order to be seen by others. We might picture him standing in front of the people, lifting his face up to heaven as he prays, probably out loud, as that was the normal custom during prayer. He wants everyone to see his piety.

It recalls what Jesus says about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, **“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward”** (Matt. 6:5). And when Jesus says, **“They have received their reward,”** he means that they have been seen by others. That's really all they wanted, so that's what they got. They were seen by others, but God did not hear their prayer. Likewise, the Pharisee in this parable is not heard by God. He does not ask for God's mercy, so he does not receive God's mercy.

His prayer is pure arrogance, thinly veiled in a false humility. He's better than other people, and he knows it. He doesn't commit the same sins as other people, like extortion or adultery. He fasts twice a week. He tithes off everything he gets. He even notices the tax collector standing far off, and he thanks God that he is not like him. It's pure arrogance. But there's a very thin veil of false humility. Did you notice what he does in order to pretend to be humble about it? He thanks God for it. He gives God the credit for him being better than everyone else. It's so ridiculous.

The tax collector is the complete opposite. He stands far off. It's more like he does not want to be seen by others. And maybe he has a fear of approaching God too hastily. After all, he knows what he is. He knows he has no right to receive anything good from God. So he doesn't lift his eyes to heaven, as was customary for the Jews when they prayed. He's afraid to. He **“beat his breast and prayed, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ”** (18:13). Notice how short that prayer is. He doesn't go on and on like the Pharisee did. He addresses God. He asks for the one thing he knows he needs. And he confesses who he is. That's it. And he goes to his house justified, while the pious Pharisee does not.

So this parable is for anyone who feels uncomfortable at church. It is for anyone who feels like they need to dress themselves up. And I'm not talking about your clothing, but your

CONFESSION (Luke 18:9-17)

reputation. Forget about how people see you. That's not why you're here. You don't need to pretend that you didn't do whatever it is you did yesterday. If you want to play the part of a good Christian, so that others will see you and think well of you, then that's what your reward will be. Others will think well of you, but you will not go home justified.

But this is really for those who feel uncomfortable in the presence of God. It is for those who know they are sinners in need of God's mercy. Confess your sin. Pray for God's mercy. And you will go home justified.

The word "justify" means "to declare righteous." And who did God justify in the parable? Consider the Pharisee, who came with all of his good works. Did God look at him and say, "Good for you, I can see that you are righteous"? No. God did not justify him. But he looked upon the tax collector, who said, " 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner,' " and he declared him righteous.

I said before that the Pharisee and the tax collector really have a lot in common. That might sound kind of weird, because they appear to be very different. But at their core, they are the same. Everything on the outside was different. But the inside was the same. They were both horrible people. They were both sinners in need of God's mercy. The first difference between them, really, is that the tax collector had better theology. They were both sinners, but the tax collector had better theology. He knew who he was, and he knew that God is merciful. So instead of telling God all the reasons he should declare him righteous, he simply begged for mercy. And God justified him. God forgave his sins, he declared him righteous, and that sinful man went home justified. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Now why is this? Why does God exalt the humble and humble those who exalt themselves? Is it because God just cares about humility more than other virtues? What if one person goes around burning people's houses, but then he humbles himself. Does God say, "I don't really care how you treat other people, as long as you're humble about it"? And then another person dedicates his life to rebuilding the houses the other person burned down. But he starts to feel a little satisfaction for his good works. Does God then smite that person, as if the one thing he really can't stand is someone feeling proud of themselves?

If that's the case, humility would just be a different kind of good work, and we should be especially careful to not take pride in our humility, because then we would lose it, and we would be condemned again. Moreover, God would not be just. He would be favoring one virtue over all the others, and he would be excusing every sin except for pride. This would not be just. No. Your confession is not the reason God forgives you. Your humility does not move his heart to forgive you. And this is really good, because then we would wonder if we're really being humble enough. Instead, God forgives your sin because he has already paid for your sin, and he has promised to forgive you when you confess your sin.

That is because, when God talks about humbling the exalted and exalting the humble, he starts with himself. Who is more exalted than God himself? No one. And he has a right to be exalted, because he is perfect and pure. But he humbled himself to our state. He was born as one of us, taking on the flesh of a humble and poor infant. He even humbled himself to the point of death. But it was no ordinary death. It was death on a cross. It was a criminal's death. It was not an ordinary, "get old, get sick, and then die" kind of death. And it was not the tragic "die too soon" kind of death. It was a criminal's death. It was the kind of death where people look at him and say, "This man deserves to die" (Matt. 26:66; Mark 14:64; John 19:7). That was the point

CONFESSION (Luke 18:9-17)

that Jesus humbled himself to. The exalted Son of God humbled himself to a shameful death. This is as low as it gets: to die in such a way that people watching are glad you are dying.

He did this to suffer the condemnation for your sin. It wasn't just the people who condemned Jesus. It wasn't just the governor, Pontius Pilate, who condemned Jesus. But his own Father in heaven condemned him when Jesus willingly assumed all the sin of the world into his own body (1 Pet. 2:24), and God the Father justly condemned all sin in the flesh of his Son (Rom. 8:3). Jesus humbled himself to the point of being condemned by man and by God. He did this to atone for your sin and to lift you from that sin to his rightfully exalted state. After Jesus humbled himself, God the Father exalted him to the highest place. Jesus was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God in heaven (Phil. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:22). And he has done all this in order to bring you with him. You who are baptized into Jesus Christ have been buried with him, and you will also be raised with him (Rom. 6:4-5). We will even reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12).

So God justifies you. He declares that you are righteous for Jesus' sake. And when God says this about you, there is nothing more true he could possibly say about you. We confess that we are sinners, and God declares us righteous. This is true, because Jesus bled and died for those sins. And when God speaks it, it is true.

God exalts the humble, because the Son of God humbled himself to the lowest place, and is now exalted to the highest place. So when we humble ourselves and pray, **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner,”** God is not rewarding us for our humility, he is rewarding us for Christ's humility. Take no confidence in yourself. Do not trust your good works. Do not trust your humility. Do not trust your own confession of sin. But you can trust in the humility and exaltation of Jesus Christ. You can trust in his sacrifice. You can trust in his righteousness. And you can trust the promise of God, that, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Amen,

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.