

Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men.’

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This reading is a hard saying, just as the one last week, where we heard of the corrupt judge who gave the widow justice only after endless nagging. The reading where Christ asks us *‘When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith upon the earth?’*

Again I ask, *will He?*

To many, this parable seems simple, there is a prideful Pharisee, and a wicked but penitent tax collector. The Pharisee tells God of all the good he has done, and believes himself deserving of salvation. The tax collector knows he is a robber and a traitor, and so confesses his sinfulness. Christ renders a simple judgment: to the self-righteous Pharisee is given nothing, To the sinful but self-loathing tax man is given justification, forgiveness.

But this is all wrong. The Pharisee is not prideful, at least he does not think so, nor is the tax-collector humble, for self-hatred is not humility.

For the Pharisee himself says, *‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even as a tax-collector.’* We are quick to focus on the fact that the Pharisee is comparing himself to others. We are long to note what He says at the very beginning, *‘God, I thank you.’*

The Pharisee in this parable does not believe that he is righteous by any power and strength in and of himself. Not at all. If we are to trust the prayer that Christ puts in his mouth, he believes that his holiness comes from one source, and one source alone: the Lord God, Maker of Heaven and Earth.

He does not profess his own righteousness, but that of God. His righteousness,

whatever it may be, whether it being him being saved from adultery or theft or murder, this he credits to God alone. The Pharisee is not a bad theologian. To put it simply, the Pharisee believes in salvation by grace alone. He is but a borrower of that grace, a sharer in the holiness of God. And he is thankful.

The tax-collector is not so. He does not thank God for anything, neither does He credit the Lord with any virtue he has. He is an ingrate, for even a tax-collector, the most hated of people during his time, and perhaps in our own a few days a year, has much to be thankful for; those gifts God gives to all men: our bodies and soul, eyes, ears, and all our senses, clothing, shoes, food and drink, house and home.

He has much to be thankful for, yet he gives no thanks. It seems the tax collector is rightfully hated, for he has no gratitude.

Instead, all he says is '*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*'

God is the creator of all that ever was, and all that ever is. This is a self-evident fact, for nothing can come from nothing. So it follows that neither does our righteousness come from nothing, but comes from something, or rather one thing, or rather one God, the *maker of all things visible and invisible*. Reason tells us this. So does the creed. So does Jesus, and so does Jesus' Pharisee.

But what does a perfect God do to him that destroys all that He has created? What does He do to the marauder, the thief, the murderer?

He is a just God, and it only makes sense that, even as a carpenter exterminates termites that threaten his work, the Lord would exterminate sinners who break the good rule of His world.

This seems cruel to us, but only because we are the termites, not the carpenter, who is entirely within the right to protect what He has made.

It is to believe the unbelievable, and to see the unseeable, to think that this carpenter would forgive the termite, that the maker would absolve the destroyer, that the one righteous God would justify the unrighteous man.

Last week, the Lord asks, *'When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith upon the earth?'*

'Now faith is the evidence of things not yet seen.' And to all who wander

this earth, the mercy of God is not something self-evident, and surely not as self-evident as the goodness of creation, of house and home, eyes and ears, body and soul.

And yet it is this mercy, which is unseen, unreasonable, irrational, that the tax-collector begs for.

For he is no different than the widow from Christ's last parable. He seeks what is not reasonable to seek, and searches for what is not rational to find. In the widow's case, it is justice *against the adversary*. In the tax-collector's case, it is the opposite, forgiveness for the adversary; for though we may sympathize with him, since he seems so pathetic, he remains a robber and traitor, a tax collector and an adversary.

Yet the Lord speaks clearly, *'This man went down to his house justified.'* Even as the persistent widow went away from the judge *'having received justice.'*

This reading is a hard saying. For both receive justice, and for opposite reasons.

Yet Christ closes His parable with this: *'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.'*

This is a strange little proverb, for it says that *everyone who exalts himself will be humbled*. And indeed, everyone will, for whether one is a Pharisee or a tax-collector, a widow or a judge, we all make demands, we all reek with ingratitude, we all refuse to turn away from our way of life, our grudges and hatreds, and seek after what is to our benefit.

But though *everyone* exalts himself, and is humbled, there is but one who *humbles himself, and is exalted*. This is the Son of God, who made Himself the Son of Man, in the form of a servant, [in the weakness of flesh] in obedience to the will of His Father, to save sinful, unworthy,

blasphemous, and diseased mankind.

This Son of Man is coming, to make right the nightmare that man has dreamed, to bring justice to all *blood crying from the ground* and the kingdom to the *little children* who have nothing to give.

He asks, *'when he comes, will He find faith upon the earth?'* Faith in what is not evident, in what is not seen? Will he find faith in God's mercy upon the repentant sinner, grace on the persistent wretch, or forgiveness upon the lost and treacherous soul?

I tell you, He will find such faith in at least one, one *'who was standing far off.'* One who said *'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'* For at least he, and perhaps he alone, believed in this mercy not yet seen.

Cain was a murderer, for he slew his brother Abel. God rendered a just punishment upon him, that he should forever be an exile and a wanderer. But Cain prayed to God, that he could not bear such a punishment, and to his surprise, God showed him that which he did not see, even as he shows us that which we do not see, the mercy of the Lord.

'Whosoever slayeth Cain, shall be slain seven-fold.'

'And the devil that deceived them shall be cast into the lake of brimstone and fire, where he shall be tormented forever and ever.'

'But let all those who have faith in thee rejoice.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Genesis 4:1-15; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-17.