

I.N.I.

Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020
Luke 18:9-14

In Christ Jesus, whose Justice exalts the humble and humbles the exalted, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

"It's not my fault!" Does that sound familiar? If you're a parent, you've probably heard your child say that. If you're a supervisor, you've probably heard it from an employee. What always follows that statement? That person attempts to justify himself or herself. And what does that mean? They make an excuse for what they did. They try to shift the blame and get out of whatever consequences might be coming.

It's kind of ironic that we use the word *justify* for that, because *justify* is one of the most important words in the Bible. It means that God "declares us not guilty" in His courtroom. But when we use it in everyday speech, it almost always means that we make an excuse. That subtle difference illustrates the theme of our Lenten devotions. As we mentioned our mid-week Lenten sermons will be focusing on irony. One dictionary defines irony as "a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what . . . might be expected." Another states it is "a figure of speech in which the literal meaning is the opposite of the intended meaning." Jesus' passion is filled with irony---situations that are different from what you would expect.

This evening, we're considering a parable Jesus told. What is the irony, the unexpected result? **THIS MAN WENT HOME JUSTIFIED.**

I. One man went home justified, but it was not the man who tried to follow God's laws.

Now, maybe this parable doesn't seem all that ironic to us. But the Gospel promises a result that is the opposite of what anyone would have the right to expect. Jesus wanted His hearers to be surprised when He told them that **THIS MAN WENT HOME JUSTIFIED, NOT THE MAN WHO TRIED TO FOLLOW GOD'S LAWS.**

Jesus told this parable to people who were confident of their own righteousness and who looked down on everyone else. Two men went up to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee prayed, **'GOD, I THANK YOU THAT I AM NOT LIKE OTHER MEN -- EXTORTIONERS, UNJUST, ADULTERERS, OR EVEN AS THIS TAX COLLECTOR. 'I FAST TWICE A WEEK; I GIVE TITHES OF ALL THAT I POSSESS.'**

We cringe at that prayer, right? But how did the audience Jesus was speaking to react? They thought they were righteous, so Jesus didn't tell a story that would sound ridiculous to them. So how did this man sound to them?

One of the ironies of this parable is how we react to the word *Pharisee*. To us, that word means proud and self-righteous. We can't imagine a Pharisee as anything other than a hypocrite. The Gospels back up that assessment. But to the first-century Jew, *Pharisee* meant something else. St. Paul was raised a Pharisee, and he was proud of that label before he came to

faith. The Pharisees were the people who defended a strict interpretation of the Old Testament law. They held that it really was the Word of God and that it really was true, unlike the Sadducees who were more like the theological liberals of many churches today.

So when this man said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer—that was true. He didn't break into people's houses or shoplift. He had never committed any crime that could get him thrown in jail. He didn't sleep around. To put it in modern terms, he didn't even have a traffic ticket. And to any first-century Jewish observer, there was a clear difference between him and the tax collector.

Tax collectors were collaborators. They worked for the Romans, who had conquered the Jewish nation, and they collected taxes from their own people. The Romans let the tax collectors collect far more than the government required and then keep the difference. Again and again in the Gospels, we also see them in the company of prostitutes and sinners. You're known by the company you keep. Even more important, you're influenced by the company you keep. Without a doubt, many tax collectors were involved in all kinds of sin.

Not only did this Pharisee avoid all that, but he gave 10 percent of his income to the Lord, just like the Old Testament laws commanded. He fasted twice a week far more than the Jewish Law demanded. So, it's pretty easy to see why this man would be pleased with the kind of man he was. Jesus' listeners would identify with him and agree what a good man he was.

So what was the problem? It was the pride in his heart. One of the great ironies we learn from Scripture is that even though we might be doing the right thing, if it's for the wrong reason, we're still guilty of sin. This man was confident of his own righteousness. He thought he was earning points with God by what he was doing. He thought that he was coming out ahead in God's record book.

Why wasn't he? Because he ignored everything God said in the Old Testament about needing a new heart, about approaching God with humility, about acknowledging one's sin, repenting of it and realizing that we are saved by God's mercy.

Another great irony of Scripture is that people who think they can keep God's laws always have to rewrite those laws. They always cut off the parts they can't keep—like having a pure heart and a humble spirit or avoiding lust and greed and coveting. Then they add things they can do—like fasting twice a week or giving a tenth of their income to church. They then tell themselves that they are doing God's will. That simply is not true. This man was not justified. In God's court, he was still guilty.

Can we ever be confident of our own righteousness? Could we ever pray: "I thank you, God, that we in our church, in our synod, are not like other churches. We practice the doctrine of church fellowship and we maintain purity of doctrine and practice. We discipline those who live openly public sinful lives. We're not like the Catholic or the Methodist or the Baptist church down the street." Or maybe we could make it a

little more personal: "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other people in this pornographic and materialistic society. I avoid Internet sites that no one should look at. I don't beat my wife or children. I don't use drugs. I stay out of trouble. And look at all I do for my congregation—I've been on the council or involved in our ladies' group. I give 10 percent of my income to the church. I never miss a Lenten service, and I always help around the church."

Could we offer that prayer? If we did, what would be wrong with it? Doesn't God command us to observe the biblical fellowship principle? Doesn't God command us to keep His doctrine pure and to stand on the truth? He most certainly does. Likewise, He does expect us to avoid immoral sights that lead us to lust. He does expect us to love our spouses and children. He does call us to support the work of the church with our offerings, our time, and our talents.

So what is the problem? The same problem this Pharisee had—pride. If we're doing all that because we think we're righteous before God, if we practically break our arms patting ourselves on the back for all we do, if we ignore the areas of our hearts and lives where we sin and tell ourselves that we're better Christians than all those others, then we have done nothing that God considers righteous. We are sinners, through and through, conceived and born in it. Sin corrupts even our best efforts and makes them filthy rags in God's sight.

Jesus is the only reason God accepts our efforts. He died and paid for the sin in our hearts that contaminates every effort we ever make to serve God. He died and paid for the pride and sin that cuts off those parts of God's law we cannot do and that adds things God never commanded. His sufferings and death erase all of God's record of our sin. And His resurrection makes us perfect in God's sight. Because God sees Jesus when He looks at us, what we do here pleases Him. Because we have been justified---declared righteous because of what Jesus did for us, we want to serve our Lord with our offerings, our time, and our effort. Because of Jesus and His mercy, we do all those difficult things, like avoiding temptation in our entertainment choices and loving and forgiving others. Knowing God's mercy in Christ is the key difference that Jesus illustrated with these two sinners who went up to the temple to pray.

II. The man who humbled himself before God went home justified.

The irony in this parable is that the man who thought of himself as a committed, churchgoing follower of God failed to grasp the meaning of repentance for a new life. But the man who lived a sinful life understood what it means to repent, and he threw himself on God's mercy. **This man, who humbled himself before God, went home justified.**

The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He prayed simply, '**GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER!**' He understood that he could not defend himself in God's courtroom. In our society, even the most obviously guilty criminals have a right to a defense in court. They can hire a lawyer. They can try to convince the jury that they really

didn't do whatever they're accused of. But in God's courtroom, there are no lawyers' tactics or schemes. There are no technicalities. There are no miscarriages of justice. God has all the evidence before Him because He knows all that we've done and said and even all that we've thought and felt.

This tax collector didn't lie to himself about his righteousness. He didn't try to justify (excuse) himself for his sin. He understood that the only verdict God's court could possibly declare was guilty. So he threw himself on God's mercy. What is mercy? It's the desire to help someone who's in trouble. God has mercy on sinners. He knows that we deserve to die and go to hell, but He loves us and wants us to in heaven with Him. So the Father sent His Son to live and die and rise again to wipe away all record of our sins.

In His mercy, He comes to us in His Word and tells us that Good News. In His Word He touches our broken hearts and produces faith and hope to stand before Him and confess our sin and plead for forgiveness. In its simplest form, repentance is longing for God's mercy and forgiveness. It begins with humility—with brutal honesty about our own guilt and our inability to earn forgiveness. Then, repentance clings to Christ in faith. We ask for mercy for this day's sins and all sins. And God justifies us personally. He doesn't make excuses for our sins. He doesn't say, "Well, they didn't know any better. They live in a society that's growing more and more anti-Christian every day. I'm just glad they're trying hard." God does something better. He comes to us in the Gospel and declares us not guilty. He reminds us that He washed our sins away in Baptism. He gives us personally the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, so we know that in His courtroom, He finds us not guilty.

No one who clings in faith to Jesus can say, "I thank you, God, that I'm not like other people." True faith is humble: "I thank You, God, that You don't give me what I deserve. I thank You, God, that You have had mercy on me. No one knows better than You how guilty I really am. But You declared me not guilty. You gave me love and forgiveness. For that I thank you, Lord."

Irony is written all over the Gospel. We will see it in our future Lenten sermons. But Jesus Himself illustrated that irony when He spoke this parable. God cares about our heart. God cares about our faith. No matter how sinful we have been, we will live with Him in heaven because of what Jesus did for us.

May we all trust Him! We have all admitted our guilt to Him in our confession of sins and clinging to His mercy in Christ we can go home today really justified—declared not guilty! Amen.