**Approaching Humble; Leaving Justified**

Based on [Luke 18:9-17](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk18.9-17)

Preached on October 23, 2016

Pentecost 23, Proper 25

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Today’s OT and Gospel readings teach us how we are to approach God. Cain and Abel both approached God by bringing him a sacrifice. Abel’s sacrifice was pleasing to God; Cain’s was not.

Jesus tells a parable of two other men: a Pharisee and a Tax Collector who also approach God. They do so by going to the Temple, God’s house, and praying there. Both men approach God: but only one leaves the temple justified, the other was not.

When you presume to approach God at His church or anywhere in prayer you will leave His presence either justified or condemned. What makes the difference is this teaching: **when you exalt yourself before God, you will remain in your sins and He will humble you; when you humble yourself before God, you will leave justified and He will exalt you.**

(1) When you approach God exalting yourself, you will be humbled. To illustrate this, Jesus includes a Pharisee in the parable. The Pharisees were a conservative sect of Jews who took pride in the strict observance of God’s Law and their own traditions concerning it. While there is nothing wrong and everything right with strictly observing God’s Law and the traditions based on that Law Jesus is nevertheless critical of the Pharisees. This is because in their keeping of God’s Law, they “**trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt**.”

All Christians should be encouraged to love God’s Law and strictly observe it. All Christians should be encouraged to love the traditions of the church and submit to them whenever they are consistent with God’s Word. But Jesus’ incisive and thorough criticism of the Pharisees is a warning to all who love the Law--to take heed because sin is crouching at your door. **Sinners—(and that includes all of you)--sinners who love the Law are at risk of holding their neighbor in contempt.** You who love the God’s Law are liable do so at the expense of your neighbor, which is ironic-because loving your neighbor—Jesus says—is the very fulfillment of the Law.

So the Pharisee approaches God in prayer in order to exalt himself. His first words are: “**God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”** This is a wrong way to pray, because it’s just not true. All men—(save Jesus)—are sinners. The Pharisees were condemned for being “whitewashed tombs filled with dead bones”…for “washing the outside of the cup while leaving the inside dirty.” And so perhaps it is true that the Pharisee never bullied anyone out of their money; maybe he never broke any civil law, maybe he never cheated on his wife…but that only means the outside of the cup is clean.

You can’t look inside of another man’s cup; only our own. And Jesus teaches you how to look for dirt there. Jesus says that a man who looks at another woman with lust is guilty of adultery. He says a man who holds a grudge against his neighbor is guilty of murder. **The bar of righteousness is much higher than just refraining from extramarital sex or taking another’s life.**

And this logic extends to the whole Law. If you obsess over having a bigger house or a nicer car or a more successful church like your neighbor’s house or car or church, you are guilty of stealing. **If you distrust your neighbor on a mere suspicion of wrongdoing judging his heart--“the inside of his cup” as it were--without evidence, you have slandered him.** If your body is at Church, but your mind is not, you have failed to keep the Sabbath day the same sin in God’s eyes as if you had stayed in bed. It is true that some people give more evidence of their sin than others, but by that virtue alone they are not righteous or justified in the sight of God who can see the inside of the cup.

And even if this Pharisee recognized the full measure of the Law, searched his heart and was not aware of any sin in thought, word or deed…he is not thereby acquitted (1 Cor 4:4). Even if he searches the inside of his cup and can see no dirt there, he is not on that account justified before God. **Because the scriptures are clear that we are worse sinners than we even realize; that we have faults not only hidden from others, but faults hidden from ourselves** (Psalm 19:12)**.** Some faults are hidden because people suppress God’s Law, or ignore it**. Others are hidden when—as was the case with the Pharisees—you specialize in one part of the law—outward righteousness—but ignore the weightier matters of inner cleanness, and an honest evaluation of oneself before God.**

It is a dangerous trap of the devil, this hypocrisy that would have you so preoccupied with the visible faults of others that you would remain blind to your own. **To exalt is to raise up; to humble is to bring low.** And this is the first way the Pharisee exalts himself in prayer—by humbling the tax collector and holding him in contempt. The Pharisee exalted himself in comparison to the tax collector; God will humble him.

The second part of the Pharisee’s prayer is an attempt to exalt himself by list his works. He says: “**I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”** There is nothing wrong with looking at your works to find assurance of faith in them. **Scripture says you are to make your calling and election sure by practicing good works** (2 Peter 1:10). If someone strikes you and instead of striking back you remember Christ’s command and turn the other cheek, that’s a good work and an assurance of faith. **Your sinful instinct is to strike back; but you resist for Christ’s sake and that’s a good work**. And you can thank God for giving you His Spirit to do so.

But the Pharisee in prayer simply lists his good works to God and his commitment to them. “**I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.**” Perhaps he could even say truthfully: “**I turn the other cheek**” or “**I go to church every week**.” Maybe it’s true, but God doesn’t need to know *that you trust him with your good works*. God wants to see *that you trust him with your sin*. In other words, He wants to find in you faith.

(2) When you approach God humbling yourself, you will be exalted. Jesus gives an example of this by including the tax collector in the parable. **In Jesus day, the Roman government awarded the right to collect taxes to the highest bidder, and they allowed them to levy a surcharge on the taxes they collected**. Tax collectors typically abused the practice and were generally considered dishonest. So Jesus places before God a Pharisee, someone who is considered righteous, next to a tax collector, someone considered unrighteous.

Once again all Christians should love God’s Law and strictly observe it. **If the tax collector is dishonest and abusing his authority through extortion, he needs to stop immediately**. When Jesus saved a woman caught in adultery from being stoned as punishment, his last words to her were “**Go and sin no more**”…in other words “stop committing adultery.” When Jesus visits Zaccheaus the tax collector in his home, Zacchaeus was so honoured he said, “**Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.**” So too, anyone who would approach God humbly must not only confess their sin, but also a desire to do better.

The tax collector humbles himself before God--not only because he acknowledges he’s a sinner--but because he repents. He is sorry for his sins, regretful even. When he entered the temple, the place where God dwells, he didn’t just say, “**God be merciful to me, a sinner**.” In doing so he stood far off--presumably away from but still facing the holy place of God’s presence--and he would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast. **He didn’t only know and admit he was a sinner. There’s nothing particularly commendable in *that***. Even Satan would do *that*. He not only admits his sin--he hates it and has no confidence in his own ability or righteousness to be able to stand with God.

Contrast that approach with the Pharisee who “stood by himself” to pray. A better translation is that “**He took his stand by himself**.” He went up to God as though he could stand on his own merits, as though he was God’s equal in righteousness.” But the tax collector not only acknowledges his sin--he hates his sin and is so ashamed of it that he would not presume to approach God because of it.

The central teaching in this text is that we are to approach God in repentant faith. In the Liturgy we invoke God’s triune name and immediately we begin with a confession of our sins before we would even presume to draw near. God is perfectly holy and just, we would not to presume to come to him as equals without permission. And he gives us permission--because the scripture says, “**If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But *if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.**”

We come to God unrighteous, confess our sins and have full assurance of faith that he forgives them—for the sake of Christ—and then He cleanses us from all unrighteousness. **He declares us righteous to approach His righteousness without fear or shame and to approach His table, where the sacrificial death of his Son gives to you righteousness and life in the eating and drinking of His body and his blood.** To give such treasures to those who are not sorry for their sin and voice no intention to amend their life--who exult themselves to the Lord’s Table--is to cast pearls before swine and God will not tolerate it. He will judge them swiftly. **But you who humble yourselves before God’s perfect Law, confess your sin and a desire to do better by the grace of God, you will be exalted by the forgiveness of your sins and you will leave God’s table justified**.

Jesus teaches us that we do not justify ourselves before God, and that any attempt to do so will lead to condemnation. **The way we show ourselves to be righteous in God’s eyes is not to exalt ourselves and brag about ourselves to him, but to humble ourselves confess our sins and submit to His judgment of them**. Those who submit to His judgment have faith and are justified. Like little children who haven’t yet learned how to lie in order to make themselves look better--**so too we receive the kingdom of God the very forgiveness of sins as little children**. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.