**Do Not Trust In Yourself**

Based on [Luke 18:9-14](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk18.9-14) and [Ephesians 2:1-10](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Eph2.1-10)

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“I tell you this man [the one who confessed he is a sinner] went down to his house *justified*, rather than the other. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Today’s gospel is a parable Jesus tells about being righteous or justified before God. Righteousness “being right”, is our biggest problem. We are poor miserable sinners. That doesn’t only mean that we sin in thought, word and deed. That’s the *result* of being a sinner, but not the *cause*. What makes us poor miserable sinners is that we are not right with God. We are out of alignment, crooked. The word for sin in the greek is “hamartia”, which literally means “missing the mark”, exactly like an archer who shoots his arrow and misses the target, or a car that veers off into the wrong lane. And what this means is that we cannot trust ourselves to think, say, or do the right thing, or to attain righteounsness by our works. Our only hope is to trust in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and for his sake we are declared to be right with God.

The Holy Spirit teaches in our epistle that, though we were created to be children of God, we are by nature children of wrath. In the beginning, God sets the mark of righteousness. Like drawing lane markers on a highway God made mankind to obey his law and follow his commands. Just as in the beginning he marked off the dimensions of the earth’s foundations and fixed the limits of the seas (Job 38) so too he set the limits for his creatures made in his own image. And these limits, his commands, his laws are not burdensome, they are who we were made to be and what we were made to do. Leviathan was made to frolic in the sea; birds were made to fly, mankind was made to work with joy in God’s garden, to be fruitful and multiply, to love one another, and most of all to fear, love and trust in God above all things.

By nature we were made to worship God in thought, word, and deed. But on account of the deception of the devil, and the complicitness of Adam, our nature was corrupted. Much of the perversion we see on open display around us--transgenderism and homosexuality for example--is rationalized by saying “this is how god made me.” No God is not the author of our perversion, but made us to hit the mark, and walk in his commmands which are not burdensome to the righteous.

But we are not righteous, our nature who we are and what we think, feel and believe naturally has been damaged by the fall. It’s such a simple and obvious fact that we are by nature damaged goods. “Dead in our trespasses and sins”. And if we cannot by nature ever naturally think, speak, or do the right thing…why do people behave as though their beliefs are justified simply by having them; or that their feelings are righteous simply because it’s how they feel?

What you believe by nature to be true is false. What you *feel* by nature to be right is wrong. Who you are as a person, considered apart from God and without his Spirit, is a poor miserable sinner. Our talk today is littered with useless prefaces: “I think this, I feel that, I believe this”. What you think and how you naturally feel is no indication of your standing before God. You’re natural self is out of alignment; your moral, intellectual, and spritual efforts are literally *shots in the dark that miss the mark* because you are by nature sinful, blind, dead enemies of God.

The scriptures are abundantly clear that, in seeking to be righteous, you are to trust no man unless he be God…and that includes yourself. You believe you have some special insight, or that your opinions on things are justified simply because you have them or feel strongly about them. By no means. Anything that comes from you, without the word of God and His Spirit—is sin.

So you can see the context for Jesus parable when the Gospel introduces it saying, “Jesus also told this parable to some who *trusted in themselves* that they were righteous and treated others with contempt:” He tells of a pharisee who boasts before God of his own nature: “Standing by himself” he prayed, “I thank you that I am not like other men”. He prayed to god saying “I thank you that I am not by nature sinful and unclean, like this tax collector.” He doesn’t ask for mercy, he doesn’t seek forgiveness, he says, “I thank you that I am a naturally righteous person.” He exalts not God, but himself.

The tax collector says “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” He says, “Forgive me lord, for I am by nature unrighteous and there is no justification for my sin.” And jesus says this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. He humbles himself, and waits upon the lord to exalt him.

Like the tax collector, we come before the altar every lord’s day and, standing far off, we confess that we are poor miserable sinners, by nature children of wrath, and we ask for God’s mercy. But there is one difference between ourselves and the tax collector: in his confession he doesn’t give any indication that God will have mercy on him. He asks for mercy, but does he expect to receive mercy?

Jesus doesn’t say, but we can assume that such a man in the temple knows that god is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. If you know you’re a sinner you do well…King saul knew he was a sinner; Judas Iscariot knew he was a poor miserable sinner…that alone did neither of them any good.

What justified the tax collector, and you and me, is trusting in the promise of the gospel, that God saves sinners of whom I am chief. And so when we confess our sins we also confess a knowledge of the gospel, that we can expect to receive mercy, not because we are poor miserable sinners, but because of the innocent, bitter suffering and death of our lord and savior Jesus Christ. Whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel, who died for our sins, who was raised for our justification, and who promises “whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”