

On more than one occasion, Jesus said, “All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus said this in Luke chapter 14 (Luke 14:11) and he says it again in our reading for today (Luke 18:14). Certainly Jesus wants to emphasize for us the importance of humbling ourselves. And so today we are going to consider the theme:

Humble Yourself

- I. By repenting of your sin.
- II. By trusting in God’s mercy.

First, humble yourself by repenting of your sin. It’s hard for us to appreciate the shock that Jesus’ first hearers would have felt when they first heard this parable. Pharisees were very highly respected because they worked very hard at following God’s laws. And tax collectors were despised because many of them would cheat people out of their money. And so people would be shocked to hear that the tax collector, rather than the Pharisee, went home justified before God.

But even though we are so far removed from the historical context of this story, we can understand their shock. What I mean is this. The Pharisee did many of the right things. He stayed away from things the Bible says to stay away from. He says, **“I thank you God, that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers” (Luke 18:11)**. And he also did many of the things that God’s law told them to do. He says, **“I give a tenth of all I get” (Luke 18:12)**. So he stayed away from a lot of the things the Bible tells us to stay away from and he did many of the things the Bible told them to do.

And so why was this Pharisee not justified before God? He was not justified before God because even though he did many of the right things, that was not the whole story. As Jesus ministered to the Pharisees, he reminded them of the other side of the story. In Luke chapter 11 Jesus said, **“Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness” (11:39)**. The Pharisee focused on the things he had done right, but he ignored the wickedness inside. The Pharisee only focused on one part of his life, the good things he had done. He ignored his sins.

He also only focused on one part of God’s law. It was true that the Pharisee was not an outward evil doer, but one commentator pointed out that God’s law also says to love your neighbor.<sup>1</sup> And the Pharisee didn’t love his neighbor. He looked down on the tax collector. So the Pharisee only looked at part of his life. He only looked at the good things he had done. And he only looked at part of God’s law, the part he had outwardly kept.

Are we ever like the Pharisee? Do we ever pridefully focus on one part of our lives, the things we have done right, and ignore our sins? Do we ever focus on one part of God’s law, the parts that other people break, and ignore other parts of God’s law, the parts that we break? Do we ever exalt ourselves by looking down on others?

The tax collector didn’t exalt himself. He humbled himself. You can see that he humbled himself by his actions. He stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even look up to heaven. He beat his breast which was a sign of grief and sorrow. And he said, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” He doesn’t make excuses. He doesn’t compare himself to others. He just is contrite before God. On this Ash Wednesday let’s follow the tax collector’s example and humble ourselves by repenting of our sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 472.

And, secondly, let's also follow the tax collector's example by trusting in God's mercy. The tax collector trusts in and relies on God's mercy. He prays, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13)**. Luke introduces this parable by saying that Jesus spoke it "to some who were confident of their own righteousness" (18:9). They trusted in their own righteousness to find them favor with God. But the tax collector did not trust in his own righteousness.<sup>2</sup> Instead he trusted in the mercy of God.

He prays, **"God have mercy on me, a sinner."** From the rest of the New Testament we know that God forgives our sins through faith in Jesus' sacrifice. In Hebrews chapter 2:17 it says that **"Jesus had to be made like us, fully human in every way, in order that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people."** (Hebrews 2:17) In 1 John 2:2 it says, **"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins."** And in Romans 3:25 it says **"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith" (Romans 3:24)**. Jesus atoned for our sins. That means he set us back at one with God. You see, our sins offend God's righteousness and holiness. Paul said in Romans that **"the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people" (Romans 1:18)**. But Jesus' sacrifice satisfied the wrath of God and through faith in Jesus' sacrifice we are reconciled to God. Our sins had separated us from God. But through faith in Jesus's sacrifice we are brought back together with God. Trust in God's mercy. Trust in Jesus' sacrifice which made atonement for your sin.

And by faith in Jesus' sacrifice your sins are forgiven. Jesus says, **"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (Luke 18:14)**. The Bible says that we are justified by faith in Jesus. To "justify" is a word that means "to declare not guilty." This word pictures God as the Judge and us as the defendant. We deserve to be declared guilty because we have sinned. But Jesus paid the price for our sins and through faith in Jesus God declares us not guilty.

The Bible says that we are justified by faith and not by works (Romans 3:28). The Pharisee had lots of works. But he did not go home justified before God. The tax collector didn't have any works, but he trusted God's mercy and so he went home justified before God. We can't be justified by our works because all of our works can't make up for our sin. But Jesus' sacrifice on the cross paid for our sins and we are justified by faith in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

So humble yourself by repenting of your sins and by trusting in God's mercy. I was reading a devotion on this passage and it had a simple prayer at the beginning of it. And the prayer was, "Lord, make us lowly of heart. Amen."<sup>3</sup> That's certainly fits with what Jesus says, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted." So let our prayer this Ash Wednesday be, "Lord, make us lowly of heart." We are made lowly by our sins. But we trust in God's mercy. We trust in the sacrifice that Jesus made for us. And when we repent and have faith in Jesus, we go home justified before God, just like the tax collector did. So on this Ash Wednesday let's humble ourselves by repenting of our sins and by trusting in God's mercy. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> I owe this insight to the commentator Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV*, AB 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1188.

<sup>3</sup> Nils Jakob Laache, "Book of Family Prayer," trans. Mark DeGarmeaux (Mankato, Minnesota: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2000), Devotion 330, page 516.