

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

We are three months into our fresh start, the year of our Lord 2022. And as the new year gets older, we are still all about the future. What will happen in Ukraine? Is the Coronavirus finally contained? Will supply chains go back to normal? Will our economy collapse, or will it recover? Pundits and politicians have all sorts of information about the future to share with you.

Tonight I also will speak about the future. However, I am able to do so with far more certainty than any of them. In fact, I don't even really need to say anything. I can just show you.

That is your future. When you stare into the ashes of that bowl, you are staring into your future. Ever since God said to Adam, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19), death has been part of the human experience; an inescapable, unavoidable reality. On Ash Wednesday, these ashes, this dust, confronts you with the most significant and certain event of your future – your death.

So it's a good thing you're here, right, in church? This is what church is all about: preparing for death, finding the solution for death, learning the secret for eternal life!

And, in Jesus' parable, that is exactly where two men are, church. **"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector" (18:10).** These two men are as different as different can be.

One of them is a Pharisee. Pharisees are model citizens, exemplarily men, the kind of guys that everyone wants to be like – Pharisees look so good. The other is a tax collector. Tax collectors are thieves and traitors who get rich by cheating their countrymen while serving the hated Roman government – tax collectors look so bad.

The Pharisee stands tall to thank God for how good he is. The tax collector bows low to beg God's forgiveness for how bad he is. And yet as different as these two men are, did you catch what they have in common? They both leave church with the very thing they came looking for.

"The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'" (18:11-12). The Pharisee comes to church looking for approval – approval based on his own goodness. And he magnifies that goodness by comparing himself to the other people, even the other people at church with him. See, there's this tax collector, and compared to him, he looks amazing.

So what the Pharisee goes to church for, is exactly what the Pharisee leaves the church with: approval – in his own eyes and probably in the eyes of everyone else.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (18:13). The tax collector also comes to church looking for approval – not in his own eyes or in the eyes of others, but in the eyes of God. This approval is not based on his own goodness, because he knows that he will never get God's approval that way.

Instead he is convinced of two truths that seem to be polar opposites. One, his own goodness will never be enough for God's approval, so he bows his head low and beats his breast in disgust at his behavior. But two, he is fully convinced that his problem is solved by God.

He prays, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (18:13).** He is not asking God to ignore his sin; or to punish him for his sin. He knows that all of the goodness he needs to stand before God, will be freely given to him by God.

That's what he is looking for, and that is exactly what he goes home with. **"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (18:14).** Jesus says that this tax collector goes home justified: he is declared not guilty of his sins and he has approval in the eyes of God.

So, what's the point of all that, and what does it have to do with ashes? Remember, Jesus speaks this parable **to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else (18:9).** It's a warning. Jesus is telling you that when the devil tries to lead you away from God, he does more than just convince you to do bad things. In fact, the devil is perfectly content to let you do all kinds of good things, because he gets you to look at those good things as the basis for God's approval.

And Satan will take anything he can get his hands on: your church attendance, your Bible reading, your daily prayers. He will take how good of a neighbor you are, how good of a citizen you are, how good of a spouse and parent you are. He will even take your repentance: "Look at how sorry you are for your sins. You're here on Ash Wednesday; so humble, you look so good." The devil will take anything that he can work with to get you **to turn to yourself.**

And that's why it is so important to pay attention to what is in this bowl. If you look for approval from God based on your own goodness, then just like the Pharisee, it has to be a relative goodness. It has to be a goodness that is in comparison to the goodness of others.

The problem is that God doesn't care about your relative goodness. It is not good enough before God if you simply try your best or give it all you've got, or if you're just a little bit better than someone else, or if you can find someone who is worse than you.

God does not expect relative goodness, God expects absolute goodness. He says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48); not, "Be better than your rotten neighbor is." He expects perfection. And what is in that bowl is a good reminder of that. We are dust, and to dust we shall return, because we are not perfect.

It's funny how people put so much effort into finding ways to be healthy, to live longer, to put off death for as long as possible. But escaping death is really quite simple: just be perfect. If you could be as good as God expects you to be, you would never have to worry about dying (Ezekiel 18:4).

But you can't (Romans 3:23). That's why *this* is your future. You can't escape it, dodge it, or delay it for very long. And no matter how good you think your goodness might be, it is not good enough. **"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (18:14).**

If you are tempted to exalt yourself and find your validation in your own goodness, you need to pay close attention to what is in that bowl. You might be able to win the approval of people, but not of God. You are dust, how can you stand before him?

Only by **turning to Jesus**. The Lord of heaven who became the criminal on the cross. The God who fills the universe, who also filled a tomb. The Lord of glory, who became the Suffering Servant so that you are justified before God. Justified! Not by ignoring sin, but by being punishing for it, instead of you!

You can be one hundred percent confident in where you stand with God. Because God has already looked at the life Jesus lived for you, and the death Jesus died for you, and he has declared that it is one hundred percent good enough, one hundred percent all you need (John 3:16). He made that crystal clear when he raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 4:25).

So as you seek your approval in the eyes of God, **turn to Jesus; not to yourself**. And you will leave church with exactly what you came to church for. And more.

One of the perks that comes with being justified before God is all about that bowl. Yes, because of your sin, ashes are a certain part of your future. And yet, because of Jesus, ashes are not your forever. Jesus has turned death from the end to a transition. When you die, your life does not end, it transitions from life on earth to eternal life with God.

That most certain and significant problem that you face has been met, has been outdone, has been undone by an even more significant and even more certain solution in Jesus. From dust – yes, that's where you came from. To dust – yes, that's where you will return. But beyond dust is your eternity. You will rise from dust through your Savior Jesus Christ (Daniel 12:2). Happy Lent. Amen.