

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 11, 2013
Luke 18:9-14ⁱ

Part I

“Two men went up to the *temple*.” The temple *stood out* in Jerusalem city proper. Its stately walls towered above all the surrounding buildings and palaces. Those walls were made of large square stones that had been hand hewn out of rock. Each stone fit tightly together so that no hammer was used in its construction.

Inside the temple, there were *two* rooms. In the *larger* of the two, the walls from floor to ceiling were lined with cedar. The flooring was made of pine planks. It was a beautiful aromatic room. Then there was the *smaller* room. It was separated from the larger room by a thick heavy curtain. Its dimensions were twenty cubits by twenty cubits by twenty cubits – a perfect cube.

Inside this smaller room set the *Ark* of the Covenant. The Ark contained the *Ten Commandments* given to Moses on Tablets of stone. Above the Ark were two angels, called cherubim. Their wingspans touched over the Ark and extended all the way to the walls. All of it – the inner walls, the Ark, the cherubim - were overlaid with gold.

This smaller room was called the *Holy of Holies*. It was God’s *dwelling place* on earth. To enter the Holy of Holies you had to *fit* the description of the Ten Commandments in the Ark. You had to, to stand before God’s presence...

So...it is that two men, sinners, go to *this* temple. They stand outside God’s dwelling place to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a Tax Collector. These two are representative of how people attempt to stand before God’s presence.

Part II

First of all, Jesus speaks of the Pharisee. The Pharisee has gotten a bad reputation over the years. You hear the word Pharisee and you think of a self-righteous snob.

While that may be the case, in Jesus’ day, the Pharisee was seen in a different light. The Pharisee was considered to be a *good* guy. He was someone with high moral values; someone highly regarded in the community.

If he were living today he might *look like* your common person, with common vocations. He might be someone who was on the school basketball team, a member of the student council, a member of the marching band. After

high school, he goes on to college or to a trade school. Once he finishes his education, he gets a job, gets married and has a family. After his family is grown up, he eventually retires. He belongs to a church and is a community volunteer. He would admit he's not perfect, but feel that he is a pretty good guy over all. That's what the Pharisee would look like today.

So the Pharisee stands before God to offer his prayer. He "prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men.'" The Pharisee starts out by congratulating *self*. He gives himself two thumbs up. He pats himself on the back for being a good person.

He does *because* he avoids the *bad* behavior of his neighbor. He does not live life in the gutter. "I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector."

Today's Pharisee might say it this way, "At least I'm not a cheat like the athletes who juice up to get an edge; not like the immoral politician who has become the subject of political jokes; not like the filthy rich who trample over others to get where they are; not like the madman who guns down innocent people."

Children who participated in basketball camp this week might have put it like this, "At least I'm not a cheater while playing; not a bully, who pushes his way around on the court; I'm not a one man team; not a ball hog."

To be sure, the Pharisee pats himself on the back for *avoiding* bad behavior, but there's more. He also gives himself two thumbs up for his abundance of *good* behavior. He goes above and beyond what his neighbor does. "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

Today's Pharisee might congratulate himself boasting in self, "I love the Lord. I just want to praise him. I dedicate my life to Jesus." None of these are wrong, in and of themselves, but there is a slippery slope. Notice where the emphasis is; it is not on God, but on "I." When the focus is on self, the goodness of man is exalted. We end up hoping that we are good enough for God.

The Pharisee in us stands before God *on* this basis. He puts confidence in what *he* is and does. That's true because the Pharisee in us does not want to ask the *uncomfortable* questions. "I, who feel contempt for the cheating athlete for the ball hog, do I want selfishly want to be the best; who turn my nose up at the immoral politician, do I sneak a peak at inappropriate material; who have no time for the filthy rich, am I unhappy with what I have; who detest the madman, do I harbor feelings of getting even?" In short, the Pharisee in us fails to see that we do not meet God's standard.

God's standard is the Ten Commandments. His standard requires that we *perfectly* meet that description in hand and heart. It reminds me of this week's basketball camp participants. They had a number of contests in which they

competed. One was the *free throw* contest. Of course, each contestant tries to make each shot. He strives to make a perfect 10 in a row. Maybe he can make ten; maybe even 20...but he can't keep doing it. He is going to miss the mark. To be sure, at this week's basketball camp, someone won the contest...but not even the winner was perfect. The most anyone made was eight in a row. In such a way, no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly. Everyone misses the mark.

So...if you think you can stand before God on the basis of what you do; if you think you can pat yourself on the back before God, think again. "He who exalts himself will be humbled." Humbled the pharisaic sinner will be sent away from God's Holy of Holies; cast out of God's heavenly temple; banished and thrown out of God's dwelling place; consigned to hell.

Part III

...then, there is the tax collector. Unlike the Pharisee of Jesus' day, the tax collector was *not* a liked man. The tax collector had the reputation of being a cheat. He did, because many tax collectors were known to get rich by overcharging the tax payer. The tax collector also worked for the hated Roman government. He collected taxes for an unwelcome foreign empire. As a result the tax collector was *shunned* by the community. No one wanted anything to do with him.

So it is that the tax collector, too, stands before God to pray. He "would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me the sinner.'" He stands back in the temple court, not up front. He looks down, not up to heaven. He beats his breast, not patting himself on his back. He compares himself with God, not his neighbor.

The tax collector does *because he knows* his neighbor is not the standard by which God measures; that the standard, rather, is the Ten Commandments which he has not met; that his heart is full of evil; that from the heart come thoughts of greed, lust, hate, worry and doubt.ⁱⁱ What was true of him is true of each one of us. "The heart is desperately wicked, who can know it,ⁱⁱⁱ" the prophet points out.

As a result, the tax collector knows that he cannot stand before God in the Holy of Holies. He cannot stand on the *basis of* his self-righteousness. He has *nothing* in his hands to bring before God. All he can do is *plead* "God be merciful to me the sinner."

The word the tax collector uses to ask for mercy is the same word used for Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat was the lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. Remember, the Ark contained the Ten Commandments; and to stand before God there meant that you had to keep them; and if you couldn't, you

couldn't stand before God and live. So...sin had to be taken away for the sinner to stand before God.

To teach that God, had the high priest sacrifice a victim one time a year. It had to be without spot or blemish; a perfect victim for the sinners' lives. Then the priest carried the victim's blood into the Holy of Holies. Imagine that! On normal days the priest, a sinner, would be struck dead. How he must have thought *twice* crossing that threshold; how he must have depended *wholly* on God's mercy stepping over it! To be sure, heaven and earth stood still as the priest, a sinner, carried that blood before God. Then, he sprinkled that shed blood on the mercy seat. The blood of the sacrificial victim satisfied God's wrath.

...and God was satisfied with the blood of the victim; for it all pointed to another sacrificial victim, Jesus. He was the perfect victim. He met the description of the Ten Commandments. He kept every commandment, with both hands and heart. It was as if he were at basketball camp. He lined up at the free throw line for the competition. He made the first basket...and the next...and the next. With baited breath of the cheering crowd, he kept making one after the other, never missing – not once. He drained basket after basket.

In such a way, Jesus met the standard of the Ten Commandments. He alone could stand before the Father. Yet, he is the one "who humbled himself" when he took your sin on the cross. Carrying your sin, *he was shunned, yes, banished from the Father's presence. Banished, his life was given for your life; and the Father's wrath was satisfied. Satisfied, the Father "exalted" Jesus. He did by raising him from the dead and then sitting him at his right hand. In that way Jesus' blood was presented before Father; it was brought before God's mercy seat; you are forgiven of all your sin.*

God does that for you, the sinner, in a special way, today. He invites you and me, unworthy sinners to this table; to stand before him. As you do, Jesus *brings* the Holy of Holies to you *here*. He touches your lips with his blood. It is the blood he brought before God's temple in heaven; the blood that satisfies God's wrath.

This blood of Jesus raises you up; God exalts you in Jesus and sits you at God's right hand in the heavenly places. You can, therefore, stand before God's presence, cleansed in the blood of Jesus. You can return to your home to do your vocations as a common person – in the workplace, in the family, in the church. You can, not in pharisaic pride, but standing in Jesus' mercy. Standing in his mercy you "go home justified," forgiven of your sins. Amen!

ⁱ Citations to the text (NKJV) are not cited in the sermon

ⁱⁱ Matthew 15.19

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremiah