

Trinity 11, 2021

Luke 18:9-14/I Corinthians 15:1-10

Part I

The psalmist asked the **question**, “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord; who may stand in his holy place?” Then he gives the **answer**, “Only he who has clean hands and a pure heart.”

There are those who **think** that they meet this description. They are those mentioned at the introduction to the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

- They trust in themselves; are confident that they are good enough for heaven; believe they have the righteousness needed to get to heaven.
- Confident in their own righteousness, they despise others, that is, look down on them. By looking down on them, they think they are more worthy than their neighbor.

So, to correct this misbelief, Jesus tells the familiar Parable. He introduces it by telling that two men go up to the temple to pray. In the words of the psalmist, “they ascend into the hill of the Lord; they stand in his holy place.”

Jesus further adds that one was a Pharisee. Pharisees had a **good** reputation; they were known for their moral and spiritual zeal. The other was a tax collector. Tax collectors had a **bad** reputation; they were known for being cheats.

Part II

Jesus focuses our attention on the Pharisee first. The Pharisee “stood and prayed thus with himself.”

Jesus’ words convey the idea that he stood **to be seen**. He stood up to make **a show** of his spiritual zeal. Then he begins his prayer. It is a prayer of **self-congratulation**.

There are **two parts** to his prayer.

- First, he **compares** himself to his neighbor. “God, I thank you that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even as this tax collector.” By comparing himself to his neighbor, he puts himself in a favorable light. Compared to them he is **morally superior**.
- Second, he cites his **spiritual zeal**. “I fast **twice** a week; I give tithes of **all** that I possess.” Tithes were **only** required of grain and livestock. The Pharisee tithed **all** he had. Fasting was required **once** a year. The Pharisee fasted **twice a week**. To be sure, he was spiritually zealous.

The point is that the Pharisee **puts confidence in** himself. He is confident that he is **morally superior** and **spiritually zealous**. Because he is, he is therefore **more worthy** to stand in the holy place. He is self-righteous.

This self-righteousness is **ingrained** in fallen mankind. Like a bad trait written in the DNA, self-righteousness is **programmed** into the fabric of Adam's fallen children. That is to say, people are born into the world with a self-righteous attitude.

So, the self-righteous **make moral comparisons**; they make those comparisons in their own favor. It is like shopping for a product online and comparing one brand against another. You stand two products side by side. You do so on a laptop comparison chart. After making the comparisons, the brand that compares **most favorably** gets your vote.

That is what the self righteous attitude does. It stands the morality of one up against another- side by side. And when that comparison comes out in one's favor, the self-righteous look down on others. The thing is, it is really a **double** standard.

For example,

- A journalist points out the wrongs of some, but gives others whom he favors a pass for the same wrongs.
- A celebrity lives an immoral life, but goes on a self-righteous “climate change” campaign.
- A public servant makes covid mandates, but then doesn’t follow his own rules.

It reminds me of what Paul wrote to the Romans,

“You who teach someone else - won’t you teach yourself?
You preach, ‘Don’t steal’ - are you stealing? [We could add,
You who say, “Don’t kill - do you use words that could kill
at times? You who say, ‘Don’t judge’ - do you judge with
words? You who say, “Don’t be greedy’ - do you act on
greed at times?]

Then Paul concludes,

You boast about the Law - are you breaking the Law and so
dishonoring God?”

To put it another way, it is easy - for us included - to use double standards and point the finger; to compare ourselves favorably with our neighbor, to put confidence in our moral superiority - but **when we do** the finger of the Law **points right back** at us.

Not only does the self-righteous make moral comparisons, he **also** puts confidence in spiritual zeal. This, too, feeds the self-righteous stance with which fallen mankind is born. It is the belief that good people go to heaven.

That is how many look at Jesus. They look at Jesus through the lens of self-righteousness. Instead of trusting in Jesus as Savior, they look at Jesus as an inner good guy voice.

It is like someone who talked to me about what the world **popularly calls** “Christ consciousness.” It is the belief that all people are born with the **same** consciousness Jesus has. You just have to meditate with yourself; by meditating you can tap

into your inner good guy; by tapping into this Christ consciousness, you can be **as good as** Jesus.

To see Jesus in this light - to think that sinners have the same consciousness of Jesus - that fallen mankind can be as good as Jesus; that we can by tapping our consciousness - is to put confidence in one's own self-righteous spiritual zeal.

That is the thread that runs through all of **man-made** spirituality; the thread of self-righteous spiritual zeal; the thread of moral superiority. This common thread is **one of the reasons** why you also hear a very **popular claim**. It is the claim that **all ways** lead to heaven. Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, and others, all lead to God.

Part III

... but **is** that true? Do all ways lead to heaven? Do we “ascend into the hill of the Lord; do we stand in his holy place” **on the basis of** our self-righteousness ? How do we know what is true?

The apostle gives us the **test** by which to answer the question. The test is the **resurrection**. The founders of all spiritual self-righteousness - Budda, Mohamed, and others - lay dead in their graves. The founder of the Christain faith - Jesus - does not.

Jesus conquered **the one thing** none of the founders of self-righteous spirituality could conquer - death. No one has, can, or will conquer death - no one, that is, **except** Jesus.

...but **why** did Jesus conquer death? The Bible answers: Jesus alone lived a perfect life; alone had “clean hands and a pure heart.” He alone could “ascend into the hill of the Lord; and stand in his holy place.” He could **on the basis of his** righteousness; his right-living.

Because Jesus did, he entered the holy place bearing our sin - our misplaced confidence in self-righteousness. He presented

his shed blood before his Father by which he atoned for our sin. He did, and the Father showed his approval by raising him from the dead.

Paul says that God promised it in the Old Testament Scriptures; and, God kept his Word. Paul summons eyewitnesses to this effect. The risen Jesus was seen by Peter, by the twelve, by more than 500 at one time, by James, and then by Paul as one born out of due time.

In short, the resurrection of Jesus **is a well documented** historical **fact**. Because it is - because Jesus conquered death - **everything** that the Scriptures say are true.

Part IV

The tax collector got that. The tax collector did not stand up to be seen; did not make a show of spiritual zeal. He stands as far back as possible. He did not lift up his eyes to heaven. Instead, he compared himself not with his neighbor, **but** with God. He

despaired of any self-righteousness; saw himself as **unworthy** and **relied only on** God's mercy.

God's mercy is **the only way** that we, too, can come before the Lord. It is

- the mercy that God has shown you and me by
 - giving his Son our sin to take away from us;
 - giving his Son hell to give us heaven;
- the mercy shown you and me by
 - raising his Son from the dead;
 - raising him in approval of a job well done
- the mercy God shows us
 - Delivering Jesus to us at pulpit, altar and font
 - Adopting and embracing us as his children in Jesus
 - Washing us clean of self righteousness in Jesus' blood
 - Clothing us in Jesus' righteous robe spun for us by his right living

- Washed and wrapped in Jesus, we can “ascend into the holy hill of the Lord; and stand in his holy place.” **There is no other way.**

Part IV

Paul calls all of this grace. That is why Paul could write,

“I am the least of the apostles, who am **not worthy** to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But **by the grace of God** I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God **working in me.**”

Paul knew the **depth** of his sin. In self-righteous spiritual zeal at one time he had actually oversaw the martyrdom of Christians. Yet, he came to know the **greater** grace of God. God in his grace and mercy put away his sin in Jesus’ death and resurrection; called him out of self-righteous zeal to the underserved forgiveness Jesus won for him.

And God's grace was at work in Paul's life. Paul did great things for God, **not** putting confidence in what he did, **but as a result of** God's grace at work in his life.

In such a way,

- **the greater we know**

- the depth of our sin
- the the foolishness of self-righteous spirituality
- the foolishness of comparing ourselves as moral superiors to others;

- **the greater we know**

- the surpassing grace and mercy of God.

And that grace works in our lives. It works in our lives

- To honor our Father with right living
 - a. By doing our duty in the family; in the workplace, and in the church
- To hand out God's grace and mercy
 - a. To those floundering and despairing of their own self-righteousness.

Part V

At the end of the Parable, Jesus renders his verdict. The tax collector **rather than** the Pharisee went home justified; declared right with God.

The Pharisee was confident in his self-righteousness and moral superiority. He was, **but** his confidence was misplaced. In God's judgment, however, the tax collector was right. His was a righteousness based not on his self-righteousness, but in God's mercy.

This is the righteousness that counts for salvation. It is trusting in God's mercy shown at the cross and empty tomb; trusting in God's mercy who lived a perfect life for you and me; who clothes you with the righteousness of Jesus in word and sacrament.

Clothed in Jesus' righteousness you get to go home **today** justified; get to go home to your Father in heaven **at the end of life**; get to "ascend into the hill of the Lord; and to stand in his holy place;" You get to, because God has declared you right with him **on the basis of** Jesus' righteousness. Amen!