

Luke 18:9–14 (Trinity XI)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
August 28, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” This morning’s Gospel Lesson is about humiliation and exaltation. Left to our own sinful devices, we inevitably fall into pride and comparing ourselves to other sinners. But when we measure our lives against God’s Law, God shows us that we are not righteous in ourselves. That’s how God humbles us and rids us of our sinful pride. Through the Gospel, God then exalts us. He raises us up by giving us the righteousness of His Son, Jesus Christ. Those who trust in themselves that they are righteous remain in their sins. But those who trust in the righteousness found in Jesus Christ alone, go home justified, or righteous in the sight of God.

What Jesus says in our Gospel reading this morning is exactly what King Solomon in his wisdom wrote in Proverbs 16[:18–19]: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” This lesson on pride and humility is portrayed throughout the Scriptures. Pride is the primal sin of Satan. The prophet Isaiah records for us the inner workings of Lucifer’s heart, and the disastrous result of his pride; “‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high . . . I will ascend above the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit” (Is 14:13–15). Pride is what cast Satan out of Heaven. Pride is also the sin that caused our first parents, Adam and Eve, to fall from their place of glory into sin. The Devil said to Eve: “you will be like God” (Gen 3:5). Man longed for something higher than what God made him to be, and so all mankind fell in Adam’s fall. Pride made Cain jealous of Abel’s offering, leading to murder. The people in the days of

Noah were destroyed in their pride (Luke 17:26; 2 Tim 3:1–2). In pride our ancestors began building the tower of Babel to make a name for themselves. And so it has gone throughout history. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

What’s difficult about pride is that it can be hard to detect. Pride hides behind the facade of respectability. The better a person is and the more outwardly good works a person performs, the more danger there is that pride will rear its ugly head and destroy whatever good there is. The original sin infects everything we do, especially what we think is good. Like a cancer that takes over the body, pride takes what is noble in us and twists it into something monstrous. That’s why Isaiah can say: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Is 64:6). Even the good things we do are soiled with the sin of pride.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus tells a parable to those who pridefully trust in themselves that they are righteous while treating others with contempt, that is, they look down on other people. The Pharisee is a model citizen. He tries to lead an honorable life by not cheating people, he deals fairly with others, and remains faithful to his wife. He fasts from food twice a week to remind Himself of his dependence on God and in thanksgiving he gives 10% of his earnings back to God. By all outward accounts this Pharisee is an upstanding citizen and churchman. His one flaw, though, is a fatal flaw. In pride the Pharisee trusts in himself and looks down upon the tax collector with contempt. The Pharisee’s pride soils his otherwise honorable deeds. “Thank God I’m not like that tax collector!” he says. The Pharisee exalts himself, and so he will be brought to humiliation.

The tax collector, on the other hand, like an IRS agent, from the outside looks like nothing but sin and iniquity. He’s involved in a dirty profession that involves extorting people to pay an occupying force. Working with the Romans, tax collectors would fleece their own people.

To make their own living they had to take more than was necessary, and oftentimes they took even more than that, as we know from Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8). Tax collectors were considered traitors, the lowest of the low. When the Pharisees really wanted to insult Jesus, they asked why He ate with “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:15–16). And even when Jesus needs an example of the kind of person to avoid, He says to treat one who refuses to listen to the Church as “a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). On the surface you can’t help but think bad things about a tax collector.

But look at how the seemingly unrighteous tax collector prays compared to how the seemingly righteous Pharisee prays. The Pharisee appears noble and upright, but he looks down on others. In this case, he looks down on the tax collector. The Pharisee measures his life against other people rather than against God’s perfect Law. The tax collector, on the other hand, compares His life to God’s perfect Law and recognizes how he has fallen. The tax collector looks like a good-for-nothing swindler, but he has a repentant heart, which only God can see. And that repentance and faith then flow out into a new life, like Zachaeus the tax collector who restored fourfold what he had stolen, or Matthew the tax collector, who gave up everything to follow Jesus. The Pharisee stands alone to be seen by others. The tax collector stands alone out of shame. The Pharisee praises his own righteousness before God while the tax collector prays: “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” Everything is not as it first appears. In pride, the Pharisee exalts himself, and so he will be humbled. The tax collector humbles himself, and so he will be exalted.

So then, all you have to do is humble yourself, right? Not exactly. Remember that pride can be hard to detect. Pride hides behind a facade of respectability. Pride can even infect our humility. You know this as false humility. We know how good it looks to be humble and our

sinful human nature responds accordingly. Appearing humble has its rewards both in the workplace and in our social circles. Pride and arrogance are off-putting. False humility says: “At least I’m not prideful, like that Pharisee.” But false humility is not true humility. False humility is simply pride in its best disguise. False humility shows us exactly how tricky the sin of pride can be. False humility is yet another way of exalting ourselves, and whoever exalts himself will be humbled.

True humility, on the other hand, is being able to say what the tax collector says from the heart: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” True humility is a matter of the heart and only God can change hearts. It is God who gives us a new heart and a new spirit. God removes our prideful heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh, as the Prophet Ezekiel [36:26] puts it. And God does this in His Word. We cannot humble ourselves; God humbles us. His Law is like a hammer that crushes our stony hearts (Jer 23:29). God’s Law is like a mirror that shows us our sin, both the inborn, inherited disease of original sin, and its rotten fruits, like pride. True repentance and conversion do not arise from our own natural abilities. It is God alone who works true repentance and conversion in our hearts through His Word. True humility comes from God alone as God uses His Word to humble us that He might also exalt us.

In humility, we confess with the repentant tax collector: “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” It’s what we say in the Kyrie every Sunday: “Lord, have mercy upon us,” “Christ, have mercy upon us,” “Lord, have mercy upon us.” God’s Word shows us our sin and in faith we confess that sin before our Father in heaven. By revealing our sin to us, God humbles us, showing us that in light of His holy Law we have fallen short. We are by nature sinful and unclean, but we also sincerely repent of our sins and pray for God’s boundless mercy. Every

Sunday we ask that God would be gracious and merciful to us poor, sinful beings for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

After God crushes our sinful, stony hearts with the hammer of the Law, He gives us a heart of flesh. The LORD creates faith in us that we might cling to the promises of the Gospel. Again from King Solomon, “One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet” (Proverbs 27:7). If in pride we are full of ourselves, there is no room for the sweetness of the Gospel. If we trust in ourselves that we are righteous, we have no need for the righteousness of Christ, because Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt 9:13). The reason God reveals the depth of our sin is so that we can recognize our need for a Savior, and that Savior from sin, death, and the Devil is Jesus Christ our LORD, who came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15).

Only Jesus embodies perfect humility. Though He was in the form of God He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. And remember, the one who humbles Himself will be exalted. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:6–11). The Son of God humbled Himself by taking on our human flesh and blood to die on the cross for our sins, and now He is exalted to the right hand of God the Father in His resurrected body for all eternity.

Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. God humbles you by showing you your sin in the mirror of the Law, and God exalts you

by raising you up again to new life in Christ through the Gospel. God accounts you righteous because of Jesus's death on the cross for your sins and in Holy Baptism God actually gives you that righteousness. This is not a righteousness of your own. It is not a righteousness you can muster by trying to be more humble. That would just be another way for pride to well up from your sinful hearts. No, unless the LORD shows you your sin you cannot understand it. And unless the LORD atones for your sin and gives you faith to trust in His promises, you could never believe these things on your own either. It is the LORD alone who is entirely responsible for your salvation. And so like the repentant tax collector you, too, leave this Temple justified. You, too, go home accounted righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.