

272. Luke 18:9–14
Trinity XI
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
August 11, 2024

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,

The doctrine of Justification is the doctrine, or the teaching, upon which the church stands or falls. That is to say, the doctrine of justification is the central and the most important teaching of Christianity. The doctrine of justification answers the question: “How can I get right with God?” The answer is that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. That’s the doctrine of justification. Everyone needs to get right with God and the only way to do that is to trust in Jesus and what He’s done for you.

And if the doctrine of justification seems too academic or too theoretical for people today, it’s not because this teaching is any less important than it’s ever been, but that even in the church of Christ, people have fallen so far they don’t even know the right questions to ask. How many people, even within the church, are concerned about how to get right with God? Very few, because so many people don’t even come close to recognizing their sinful state. Those who have fallen the deepest into sin believe themselves to be perfectly fine, or at least good enough, because they don’t think they’re any worse than other people. Or they fashion for themselves a false god, a God who isn’t too concerned about each and every individual’s personal choices.

But regardless of how much the doctrine of justification is downplayed or neglected today, nobody can escape from the question of justification, the question of how I can get right

with God. You can see this implicit longing for justification in the way people are so quick to justify themselves. They might reject the Lord and His expectations for their life, but they can't help but justify themselves whenever the opportunity comes up. You can see it in the excuses children make for what they've done wrong, or the excuses parents make for their wayward children. You can see this self-justification in how quick people are to exact retribution, to say "it's not fair," or to attempt to put themselves on a pedestal by hurting the reputation of other people. It seems as though our entire life is a life of self-justification, always defending the decisions we've made or attacking any threats to our self-image. Man is obsessed with justifying himself, if not before God, then before the world.

The doctrine of justification is even neglected in the church today because theologians don't think people are asking that vital question anymore: "How do I get right with God?" They think that was just a question of the Reformation era, a primitive, medieval way of dealing with God. The fact is that people aren't asking that question so directly anymore because they're confused, but the question is still there. It's just that in the world, and more and more in the church, people have lost sight of reality. The doctrine of justification is looked at as a theory or as an outdated way of talking about the LORD and our relationship to Him. In reality, the doctrine of justification is everything: the most vital teaching of the Christian Church, the teaching upon which the Church stands or falls, because understood correctly it leads to eternal salvation; misunderstood, it leads to eternal damnation. Christianity and everything it teaches can be summed up in the doctrine of justification.

Our Gospel text this morning—the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector—is a perfect example of what justification looks like and the chief role it plays in the Christian life. Jesus originally told this parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and

treated others with contempt. That is, Jesus told this parable for the sake of those who try to justify themselves, for the self-righteous. Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Both men went to the temple, to the house of God. Both men professed openly to be God's people. We see here that Jesus is not talking about the openly ungodly and rebellious, the enemies of the Gospel and despisers of God. Openly non-Christian people are not the subject of the parable. This is for those who call themselves Christian. Jesus is referring to those who come to God's house, to the public worship of the church. Jesus is talking about all those who want to be Christians. It's within this group—within the outward, visible fellowship of the Christian church—that we find both the self-righteous and the humble. It's just that these distinctions are a matter of the heart. You can't tell by looking at someone whether they have a self-righteous attitude or a humble attitude. Only God can look into someone's heart. Only God can see what remains hidden to our eyes.

In fact, what we see from an outside perspective can oftentimes be deceiving. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed. He thanked God. So far so good. "Give thanks to the LORD!" That's a command throughout the Scriptures. The Pharisee does what he should do by approaching the LORD in thanksgiving. But what is it that the Pharisee thanks God for? "I thank you God that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." The Pharisee doesn't thank God for the right things. He uses thanksgiving as a cover for his own righteousness. He's saying: "Look at me, God, I'm a good boy." And in a sense the Pharisee is correct. It's good not to extort money, not to act unjustly, not to commit adultery, and not to steal as tax collectors were prone to do. Those are all good things not to do. In fact, the Pharisee could have thanked God for graciously preventing his fall into the great sin, shame, and vices so common to our fallen human nature. That would be a godly thing to thank God for!

But that's not what the Pharisee is doing. The Pharisee is being self-righteous. His focus is on his own goodness, not the goodness of the LORD. You can see this in what the Pharisee does hold up to God as a worthy sacrifice: "*I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*" The Pharisee was not fasting as a reminder that his sinful flesh is weak. He wasn't disciplining the flesh, but gratifying that most fleshly desire to be recognized for a good work. The Pharisee wasn't giving his offerings as a thanksgiving for everything the LORD has given to him or as a recognition that everything, in the end, belongs to God. No, the Pharisee gave a tenth of his wealth to the LORD as payment, as a duty, as a way of looking good in the sight of God. The Pharisee presented his own righteousness to the LORD. He believed that he was righteous in himself, by his own deeds, and that God was just there to give approval.

Fasting and tithing are good. But they aren't works we can offer to God as righteousness. We aren't righteous before the Father because of the things we do or don't do. The world or the church might judge us to be good on account of these things. As matters of outward righteousness, we can judge that fasting and tithing are objectively good. But God's standard is so much higher than that. God isn't just looking at the outward work. He's looking at the inner motions of the heart, at the motivations we have that even we might not be aware of. God is judging primarily on things that cannot be seen or measured by the world. God is judging based on the faith, or the trust, that He has worked inside of us.

The Pharisee looks righteous on the outside. But he's like a whitewashed tomb. The outside is impeccable, but inside he's full of death. The tax collector, on the other hand, looks unrighteous by the world's standard. But God sees the heart. There's an inner righteousness this tax collector has that the world cannot see. The tax collector is an extortioner, a thief, the paragon of treachery. Tax collectors worked for the Romans and against their own nation. It was

a profession that heaped up shame. But there's one key difference: the tax collector is repentant. He might still look bad before his own people and before the entire world, but the tax collector is right with God. He is righteous in God's sight because he doesn't hold up his own works or his own virtues. God doesn't need those filthy rags.

Instead, the tax collector holds up his sin and shame. That's the only thing he can offer to a God who already knows everything. The tax collector knows that even the good things he's done are clouded by self-serving motivations. He doesn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but in shame beats his breast and says: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The tax collector admits he's a sinner and is at the mercy of God. He confesses his sin with a gesture that has been passed on for many ages in the church as a sign of repentance: beating the breast.

At the service of compline, the prayer service before going to bed, the confession of sins often involves a gentle beating of the breast: "I confess before the whole company of heaven and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault; wherefore I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life. Amen." The congregation responds with an absolution: "The almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon, forgiveness, and remission of all your sins. Amen." If you confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive you your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. The LORD isn't looking for you to pay for your sins or to make up for what you've done. You can't repay the debt you owe. Only God could do that in Jesus Christ. What He's looking for is your humility, not as a virtue, but as an attitude, a recognition that you have nothing to offer before the throne of God except the blood of Jesus Christ.

“I tell you,” says Jesus, “this man” that is, this tax collector, “went down to his house justified, rather than the other one,” rather than the Pharisee. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The Pharisee and the self-righteous exalt themselves. They bring their good works and their good behavior before the LORD and say: “At least I’m not as bad as other people.” And so their filthy rags become even more filthy. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. They’ll be made low. They’ll be cast away from the presence of God. But the one who humbles himself, the one who recognizes he has nothing to offer God except sin and shame, that person will be exalted. God will take his filthy rags and wash them clean in the blood of Jesus. The LORD declares the repentant sinner to be righteous for the sake of Jesus. Such a repentant sinner will be exalted higher than he ever could be on his own. And only then can he truly begin to do something good because of his changed heart and mind.

Humble yourselves under the almighty hand of God, dear Christian. Recognize your sin, your shame, your weaknesses and your failings every day, and bring them before the LORD. Recognize your unworthiness and confess it. Don’t listen to the world, which tries to tell you everything is fine already. Don’t fashion for yourself a false God, who doesn’t really care about what you do. God is perfectly holy and he can’t stand sin in His presence. But more than that, He can’t stand self-righteousness in His presence. God deals with sin by paying for it with the price of His own dear Son. Nothing you bring can match that. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you” (1 Pet 5:6), for the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses you from all sin (1 John 1:7). The blood of Jesus justifies you. It makes you right with God, not in theory, but in a more real way than you could ever imagine. 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.