

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Quinquagesima Sunday, February 7, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 370, 323:1, 371, 323:2-5, 321.

Lessons: Psalm 51, Philippians 3:1-21, Luke 14:1-14.

Sermon Text: Luke 18:9-14.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

How would you feel if a shabbily dressed homeless person or a drug addict came into church on a Sunday morning and sat next to you? Would you feel like moving to different place, or would you be glad that he or she had come to church?

Sometimes Christians feel that they are better than other people. Today we hear a parable in which Jesus showed the Pharisees that they could not be saved by the outwardly good lives they lived. True righteousness comes only through faith in Jesus and his death which paid for our sins.

Two people are shown to us today. The Pharisee trusted in himself. The tax collector looked to Jesus for salvation. Today we answer the question:

WHAT KIND OF RELIGION REALLY PLEASES GOD?

- 1. Not work-righteousness of those who behave like the Pharisee, but**
- 2. A humble confession of sins appealing to God's mercy in Christ.**

The Pharisees and the tax collectors, called Publicans in many Bible translations, were found wherever in Palestine Jews lived when Jesus lived on earth. The Pharisees had much respect from the people and the tax collectors were greatly despised. The Old Testament laws were the foundation of the Pharisees' teachings. They stressed outward obedience to these laws and laws which men had added to God's laws. They made a great show of keeping them. They taught that the obeying of the Law would open heaven's doors for them. This stress on works is very much a part of the religious scene in our day too. It is very much a part of human thinking to earn something. This is the idea that I have to give something or do something for my eternal salvation.

The attitude for many people is that I must do something to earn my way into heaven. In fact, if we recognize the two main teachings of the Bible as Sin and Grace, as Law and Gospel, we must also recognize every religion except genuine Christianity as a religion of law. Every other religion teaches some kind of reward for "being good", that is, some kind of work-righteousness or self-righteousness.

The prevailing idea among many people is that if you obey God's laws, if you do good deeds or good works, God – or whatever supreme being you believe in – will reward you – maybe on earth, maybe in some kind of life after death.

We find this idea in pagan religious ideas, in anti-Christian organizations, and even in many of the organized Christian church bodies. Salvation by works is proclaimed boldly and openly. But true, genuine Christianity relies totally and completely on Jesus' sufferings and death after he lived a completely sinless, perfect life.

If anyone didn't deserve to be punished for any sin, it was Jesus. He never sinned. It was his blood and righteousness that earn our way into heaven.

This parable should shed God's light on all who attempt to get to heaven by their works.

These two men represent all humans – those who think that God will reward them for what they have done and those who recognize their total sinfulness and rely on Jesus’ merits.

The Publicans – tax collectors for the Roman government – were despised for serving the Roman government as well as for collecting more than they should have. They were looked upon as being thieves.

The Pharisees, of course, thought they could rely on their outward obedience to God’s laws and upon their doing all sorts of things they thought were “good deeds” or “good works”.

But what is really a good work? We learn as we study the catechism that good works are everything that a believing child of God does in the fear and love of God. Another definition of good works is whatever a believer does according to God’s Word out of love and thanks for all of God’s goodness.

So these two men came into the temple to pray.

“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: God, I thank you that I am not like all other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector.” The Pharisee prayed a “prayer” which praised his own deeds. His “prayer” is not really a prayer at all but simply bragging about himself, his supposed righteousness and moral superiority over others. He claimed to fast twice a week, which was more than was required. God demanded that his people, the Jews give a tithe – one tenth, ten per cent – of certain items for God’s work. But he claimed to give tithes of everything. He boasted about how much God needed him!

“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.’” The tax collector does not boast. He knows himself to be a sinner. With his eyes cast down, and striking his breast in humility, he pleads for mercy, confessing “just as I am without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me.” (The Lutheran Hymnal 388:1) One person, himself, the sinner was on his mind. He confessed how much he needed God.

The religion of the Pharisee was the religion of work-righteousness. In such a religion one always praises himself, boasts about his own deeds, and despises other people. Isn’t our religion different? Don’t we sincerely confess our own sins in our church services? In the first part of our regular Sunday service we say through the minister, “Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word and deed.” In our communion services we confess: “O, almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee, and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them.” In contrast to our personal confession of our sins, the Pharisee confessed nothing. He only proudly thanked God that he was not like all other men. But the Bible teaches ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”*** Romans 3:22-23. When people have a religion teaching work-righteousness, they cannot but look down on others and despise them. Their mistake is that they compare themselves with other people by human standards and do not examine themselves in the light of God’s law. God’s law tells us what the holy God demands of us. It teaches us that God accepts nothing less than perfection. It tells us, ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”*** Matthew 5:48. No one is perfect, and therefore we have to confess our sins to the Lord. The Lord condemns the religion of work-righteousness. On another occasion Jesus told the Pharisees, ***“You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight,”*** Luke 16:15.

The tax collector, like the Pharisee, had come to the temple to worship. But what a contrast between the two men! The Pharisee stood where everyone could see him, but the tax collector stood at a distance, too ashamed of himself to be seen by men, and he certainly was ashamed to stand in the presence of the holy God. David expressed the same humble attitude, saying, ***“I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me... Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.”*** Psalm 51:3 and 9.

Jesus looks at the two men and makes it clear that the tax collector was declared just, righteous, by God. He assures us: ***“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*** The Pharisee was turned away.

When approaching God in prayer, we dare not boast of our deeds. When coming into God's presence in prayer, we must make Jesus our claim to glory. With the hymn writer we must claim "In the cross of Christ I glory." (The Lutheran Hymnal 354:1) Watch out for anyone or any idea that would lead you to exalt yourself.

What does God want from men? "***The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.***" (Psalm 51:17) We pray in Psalm 51:9 "***Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.***"

God invites us in Psalm 50: "***call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.***" (Psalm 50:15 KJV)

The blessed Gospel message teaches us what religion alone truly pleases God. The only religion that pleases God is not the one that tells of us of man's righteousness, but the one that tells of Christ's righteousness earned for the sinner. Everything depends on Christ and what he did for us. Paul had to learn that when he was converted. Before his conversion Paul describes himself as a perfect Pharisee, most zealous in trying to keep laws, rules and commandments. And he was some-body in the world. He was greatly admired among the Pharisees. But after his conversion this was his attitude: "***Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith,***" Philipians 5:7-9.

The Pharisee in the temple did not believe in Christ and his righteousness. He trusted in his own works and merit. He went home from the temple still in his sins and in unbelief. The tax collector, on the other hand, trusted only in God's mercy that God shows to mankind for Jesus' sake. So Jesus said, "***I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.***"

May we all realize the foolishness and the complete futility of earning our own righteousness by trying to be good. If we trust in our own works, how can we ever be sure that we have done enough to earn heaven? How can we ever be sure of salvation? But if we by God's grace accept the only religion that pleases God, that is, salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus alone, as proclaimed in the genuine Gospel of Christ, then we have this precious assurance: "***Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God,***" Romans 5:1-2. May this always be our sure confidence! Amen.

(See the Ministry By Mail sermon for Trinity - 14, August 28, 2005, by M.H. Eibs, "**WHAT IS THE ONLY RELIGION PLEASING TO GOD?**")