

Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 18:9-14

The Mercies of the Lord Are New Every Morning

Do you know of a perfect church-goer? There are many Christians I admire for all the love they show to hospital patients and all kinds of needy people. Yet these people are the first to admit their imperfections and short-comings. Just like in today's parable, we learn of two different kinds of people in God's House; so too our churches are made up of all kinds of imperfect men and women. Our churches are like hospitals, helping sinners receive help and healing for their sins. Church-goers are often referred to as "a mob of hypocrites". Sadly, those who say that often have faults of their own, faults to which they're often quite blind.

There is no shortage of Pharisees in today's world. Perhaps, there's a bit of Pharisee in each of us. Whenever we're tempted to criticize someone else, we need to say: "**There, but for the grace of God, go I.**" It's always wrong to compare ourselves with other people around us because we don't know what difficulties they have to deal with in their private lives. Criticising others blinds us to our own faults. That's why Jesus says to us that we should first remove the log in our own eye before speaking to someone else about the speck in their eye.

When we study the lives of the saints, we see they have these things in common – they're kind to everyone and they remind us of Jesus. Despite being aware of their sin and need for God's grace and mercy, they radiate goodness and gratitude. Jesus is the only example they point to, as they pray to be free of hypocrisy. Hypocrites, however, consider their actions and comments to be well intended. But the good they intend so often does more harm than good. It's quite dangerous to think that "*at least I'm not like the Pharisee in today's parable.*"

This morning's parable is the only one told by Jesus that takes place in the temple. Most of Jesus' other parables take place in everyday situations. Jesus tells this parable to those people who thought they were better than others and who looked down on everyone else. A rabbi called Simeon ben Jochai (*jock-eye*) said, *"If there are only two righteous people in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he."* Jesus' audience would have recognised that what the Pharisee said was true. He really had done many good deeds, doing way more than was expected. He had committed no crime. He represented what many Jews thought was good about their religious community.

You see, the Pharisees did a lot of good for their religion. Their problem was that, considering themselves to be better than others, they kept to themselves so that their practice of their religion couldn't be contaminated. The Pharisee in the temple stands apart from others and prays aloud so that others can hear all the "good" things he has done. He's talking to himself about himself, as he congratulates himself on what a good job he has done.

The word "I" occurs five times in this prayer. He gives thanks for what he is and not for who God is, for what God has given to him, and worked through him. He asks for nothing from God, not even for God's mercy. His prayer is all about how great he is, and not about how great God is. He fasts and tithes more of his income than is suggested. He's pleased that he is so much better than other sinners like the tax collector nearby. He expects to leave God's House confirmed in his own estimation of himself as a righteous person.

God, however, thinks otherwise.

Meanwhile, the tax official's body language speaks volumes about how he views himself. He makes himself as inconspicuous as possible with his face cast downwards. He realises what a rotter he is. He makes no excuses for what he has done. He doesn't seek to justify himself in any way. In his confession, he speaks as if he is the only sinner on earth. Echoing the opening words of Psalm 51, he throws himself totally on God's mercy when he says, **"God, be merciful to me, THE sinner"**.

It was rare in Jesus' time for a man to beat his chest. But this loathed tax official is so overcome by all the wrong he has done that he beats his

chest where his heart is, at the source of the sins he now so bitterly regrets. There is only one person whose sins he is concerned about and that's his own. He acknowledges that God's verdict on him up to now is just. The only thing that can help him and make a new future possible is God's great mercy. The word he uses for mercy means **"to make atonement for my sins"**. He has come to the temple where atonement for sins is made by God.

Now there is no prayer that thrills God more than **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner"**. There's no more welcome statement about our merciful Lord than **"the mercies of the Lord are new every morning"**. This means that each new day you can make a new start in your relationship with God, because what God forgives, God forgets.

A man named Christian was worried about his friend Jim. Jim was always so hard on himself. He blamed himself for everything. He told Christian he felt guilty for not caring for his family as well as he should have, guilty for not spending as much time with his children as he should have, guilty for not being as successful at work as he should have. The load of guilt he carried affected his sense of well-being, as well as his relationships with others. Christian didn't know how to help him. One day as he read the Letter to the Romans in his Bible, he realized. He read of how we're justified, that is, put right with God, by what Christ has done for us. This means that no further charge can be brought against God's people because the verdict of "not guilty" has been pronounced over them (Romans 5:11). Immediately, Christian thought of Jim. He couldn't wait to tell his friend that in God's eyes, he wasn't guilty. Jesus had taken Jim's guilt on Himself. Through faith in Christ, we're declared no longer guilty. We read in Romans 8:1, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."**

The closer we are to God, the more we're aware of our sinfulness. God welcomes the broken-hearted who have no one else to go to but Him. That's why we sing to Jesus our Saviour,

**Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to Your cross I cling.**

In telling us this parable, Jesus is pointing to what He will do for us on Good Friday when He paid the price for our sins so that we might be free of them.

This parable, like many of our Saviour's other parables, had an unexpected conclusion that would have shocked His listeners. They would have thought that the Pharisee and not the tax collector merited God's approval. Jesus reverses their expectations, in that someone considered the lowest of the low, with no righteousness of his own, is put right with God by grace alone. The Pharisee asked for nothing from God and got nothing; the tax collector received all he asked for: God's unmerited mercy!

Today's parable asks each one of us who we identify with. There may be something of both the Pharisee and the tax collector in most of us. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ eliminates every idea of spiritual superiority by any of us. Instead of any feelings of spiritual superiority, we thank God for all our fellow Christians and all the good things they do for God behind the scenes, things only God knows about.

In gratitude for the fact that the mercy of the Lord is new every day, we eagerly do what our Lord encourages us to do. He encourages us to **“Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy the Lord has shown you (Mark 5:19).”**

Our hymn 317 sums up so well the message in today's Gospel:

**On God's grace we have no claim / Yet to us His pledge is given;
He hath sworn by His own name / Open are the gates of heaven.
Take to heart this word, and live / Jesus sinners doth receive.**

We pray:

Merciful God, help us to be more like Jesus and less like the Pharisees, day by day, as long as we live. Amen.