

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Text: St. Luke 18:9-14

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve, pour down upon us the abundance of Thy mercy, forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask but through the merits and mediation of JESUS CHRIST, Thy SON, our LORD, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the HOLY GHOST, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The Collect for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity is, perhaps, among the most beautiful of the Trinity season; indeed, perhaps even the entire year. Oh, but that every Christian would begin his or her day with such a prayer, especially as he or she enters into the courts of the LORD's House and prepares to receive from the hand of our gracious God the abundance of His mercy.

While it is true that our freedom in the Gospel commands no specific form of worship, though certainly there *are* forms better left in concert halls and smoky nightclubs where the proper intent is to entertain and amuse, there is, indeed, a right way and a wrong way to appear before God; a right way and a wrong way to worship; a right and a wrong kind of heart to carry into the LORD's house; a right and a wrong way to pray. True worship begins with repentance and confession, with admitting oneself to be a miserable sinner in need of the mercy of God. The truest form of worship exists in the casting of oneself upon the grace, mercy, and love of God with the firm conviction that He hears one's cry and forgives one's sins.

For what profit is there in songs of praise if one has no idea the reason for his or her singing? If one has no need of mercy, of what good is fasting or the giving of tithes? Certainly, if one is not ill he has no need of a physician, and it follows that if one is no sinner, then neither has he or she any need of CHRIST and His mercy. If one's supposed faith serves only as a pretext for ignorance, vanity, and self-indulgence, if it only serves to make one proud, haughty, selfish, and self-righteous, it is of little, if any value, to a sinner.

Therefore, moderate yourself O Pharisee, and repent. Put a lock on your tongue. For you speak to God who knows all things. He is no fool and your sins are not hidden from Him even if you are successful in hiding them from yourself. Instead, throw

yourself at His feet confessing those things whereof your conscience is afraid, seeking from Him those good things that none of us is worthy to ask but through the merits and mediation of JESUS CHRIST, our LORD and SAVIOR. Do this and you shall go down to your house justified.

Is this not the message our LORD intends in the Gospel text observed on this day? We are sinners in dire need of God's divine grace and mercy. Reliance on our own merit, strength, or righteousness will not do, for they are no more than filthy rags soiled by our sin. Security that can be found in human merit is nothing more than shifting sand, a false religion that worships the idol of self; a religion of futility that can only lead to death.

True religion does away with the proposition that there is anything one can do to reconcile one's relationship with God. If one believes anything else, then he or she is no better off than the Pharisee with his self-praise and self-worship. For there is only one God, only One whose merit can justify and raise the dead, and you my friend are not Him. The true meaning of the parable our LORD speaks this day is that both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector are dead in sin, and their only hope is someone who can raise the dead.

No man or woman, no matter how good, can accomplish this. No man or woman can raise themselves from the dead. To be raised from the dead requires atonement, an expiation or complete removal of one's sins. To be raised from the dead one must first and foremost recognize the fact that one *is* dead. Until one is ready to admit he or she is dead, one cannot believe in one's need to be raised. Until one releases one's hold on merit that God cannot use, one can never hope to enjoy the merit of CHRIST which God so freely gives. Until one admits that he or she is dead, they will never enjoy the benefits of JESUS' resurrection—they will never know life. To be resurrected with CHRIST means to die to oneself and live to CHRIST and CHRIST alone.

Truly, truly I say to you, this is why you are here, or it should be; to be raised from the dead; to seek atonement from the only One who can provide such a miracle, for a miracle it is. To be raised from death is a free gift of God made possible only by the all-atoning sacrifice of His Son, JESUS, upon the Cross of Calvary. There is no other way. The blood of bulls and the flesh of goats could not do it, and neither can your flimsy righteousness, your merit, or your foolish pride in empty works.

Therefore those who will find mercy must first learn to despise themselves and cast confidence in their own works aside. St. Paul writes: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."* Therefore, we must despise our own righteousness, which, in truth, is no righteousness at all. As it is written in the Book of Ecclesiastes, *"For there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin."* and in Saint Paul's epistle to the

Christian congregation in Rome, *“There is none righteous, no, not one.”* We must trust in the only One righteous—JESUS CHRIST. Only with Him and in Him will we find mercy. To trust in anything or anyone else, even the works of the Law, leads only to Hell and eternal death.

Therefore, the tax collector of our text was justified, not because he was humble, but because he confessed that he was dead. He placed his confidence and trust not in his own reason or strength, not in his own works and merit, but entirely in the LORD and His mercy. He despaired of his own merits and character and entrusted himself completely to the merits and character of God. He saw himself not just as one sinner among many; he saw himself as the greatest sinner, indeed, the embodiment of sin. He did not compare himself to others claiming to be less sinful, rather he knew and confessed that he is the worst sinner of all. He relied, not on his own sacrifice, but on God’s sacrifice. He desired the atonement for sin that only God can provide through the shedding of the Blood of JESUS. The tax collector prayed, *“God be merciful to me a sinner!”* trusting in the LORD’s sacrificial mercy, and yearning for the day when the MESSIAH would come and bring all these things to their fulfillment.

So the tax collector went down to his house justified, having been declared by God to be innocent and free from sin. For God has more joy over *“one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance”* and all heaven rejoices with Him. This is so, because God honors repentance more than praise. For God has said, *“I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”* He is the Great Physician who comes to heal the sick, those who sin—those who are just like other men. He comes for sinners; He comes for you and me; not on our terms, but on His terms. So we bow our heads and beg for mercy believing our LORD’s promise that *“...everyone who asks receives....”*

So come now, just like your brother the tax collector. Come with your pain, your fear, your worries, your shame, your loneliness and your doubt—come with your sin. Come to where God promises to be. Come to the place where He has promised to extend to you His mercy. Come to where He gives of Himself to you. Come to the Temple made without hands, torn down by men, but rebuilt by God in three days. Come and receive the Holy of Holies, the very embodiment of God’s grace and mercy, placed onto your tongue, that when you depart from here this morning, you go down to your house knowing that you are justified, for you will have received that which satisfied the wrath of our LORD’s FATHER, having made full atonement for your sins—the Body and Blood of His SON, our LORD JESUS CHRIST, given into death for you, raised from the tomb for you, and ascended to the throne of heaven for you.

Be at peace and return to your homes knowing you are justified. You have pleaded, just as the tax collector, *“God, be merciful to me a sinner!”* Our gracious,

merciful, and loving God has heard your plea and answered with these Words of absolution; *“Do not fear My child, for I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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