

Sermon Text: Luke 18:9 – 14
Sermon Theme: Are You Sure You Are Justified Before God?

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But 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.' "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."

With the news about Brett Favre signing to play for the Minnesota Vikings, I am going to guess that just about everyone here today knows that we are, once again, in the Pre-Season of the National Football League. From the grade school level to the professional level, players are reviewing the basics of playing the game of football. We are also at that time of year when school is starting up again. As it happens year after year, so too this year, students will return to the classroom to continue learning the basics they need in reading, writing and arithmetic. Today, you and I have the opportunity to hear from God's Word a very basic teaching found in the Bible. In fact, it is the teaching at the center of the Bible. How are people able to be sure that when they die, they will go to heaven? How are people saved? Are you sure that you are saved? Or, to use words of Jesus found in our Gospel Lesson for today, together we hear God's Word answer the question, "Are you sure that you are justified before God?"

Before we go any farther, we need to make sure we understand two terms that are found in our Gospel reading for today. We are told, "To some who were confident of their own **righteousness** and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable..." that is before us today. What is righteousness? What smaller word do you find in the word "righteousness"? It is the word "right". Jesus is telling this parable to people who think that they can make themselves right with a holy and just God; that they can make themselves sinless or perfect in God's eyes on their own.

The other word that we want to take make sure we understand properly is: "**justified**". This is a word that takes us right into the court room of God himself. Picture God the Father seated on the judge's bench. Satan is the Prosecuting Attorney, who places before the Father evidence of all the evil things we have ever did, or said, or even thought. And he properly makes the conclusion that the only verdict that can be reached is "Guilty as charged!" But then Jesus, our Great Defense Attorney, stands up and proclaims that the charges are to be dropped. When asked how such a guilty person could be let go, Jesus answers that, through his perfect life, and his holy, precious blood shed on the cross, he himself has paid the price in full for all the evil words, all the evil actions and all the evil thoughts. As a result, there is no longer any evidence of guilt. So, as God the Father looks into your heart and mine, through his glasses that have been stained red with the blood of his one and only Son, Jesus, God the Father, as judge in that court room, declares you and me "Not Guilty!" This is what that word "justified" means. It means that, because of Jesus, God the Father looks into your heart and mine, and it is "just-if-I'd-never-sinned."

Let's take a few moments now and consider the parable that Jesus uses to teach you and me today. You will recall that a parable is an "earthly story, with a heavenly meaning." It is a teaching tool that Jesus used many times during his days of ministry here on this earth. Jesus begins his parable this way: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." The men in this parable are complete opposites to the people of Jesus' day. The Pharisees were viewed to be the most spiritual, the most upright people in the land. While the tax collectors worked for the Roman government, and were seen only as liars, cheats and at the bottom of society.

But we note that this is not the only way these two men are opposites. Jesus continues, “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”” In the original language, the phrase that this Pharisee’s prayer “about himself” could also be translated that he prayed “to himself” – not in the sense of silently or quietly, but that the one he was really addressing his prayer to was himself. Whether he was praying “to himself” or “about himself”, the prayer is still clear: the Pharisee felt that he was in good standing with God because he was a far better person than anyone else around him. He felt that he was right in God’s sight because of all the great things he had done.

A complete opposite attitude is found in the tax collector. Jesus tells us, “But 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.” Because of the guilt over his sin, the tax collector could not even look up to heaven as he prayed. In a sign of great sorrow over his sin, he beat his breast and pleaded with God, “have mercy on me, a sinner.” Here the original language helps us to see that this man not only humbly confessed that he was a sinner, but he calls himself “THE sinner”. Seeing himself as the chief of sinners, this tax collector threw himself on the mercy of the Lord. And, as Jesus teaches you and me today, “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.”

Now we return to the question that we started with: “Are you sure that you are justified before God?” If being declared “not guilty” before God depended on what you or I could do, what question would we have to ask ourselves over and over again? “Have I done enough to make God happy today?” “Have I done enough good things to cancel out the bad things that I did today.” If our being forgiven, if our place in heaven, depended upon your efforts or mine, we could only walk around in doubt and in fear of eternal punishment. Because God’s Word is so clear in James chapter 2, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” And again the Bible tells us in Romans chapter 6 that “the wages of sin is death.” You and I are guilty of sinning against God’s will for our lives. And the only thing we have earned for ourselves is eternal punishment in hell.

So you and I come before our gracious Savior-God, and plead in the words of the tax collector, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” As we humbly confess our sins, we hear the Good News that the prophet Nathan shared with King David in the First Lesson we heard read earlier. The Good News of the Gospel is that “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.” Because the Savior-God took action for you and me, you and I can be sure that we are justified before God. In his great love for you and me, God the Father sent his one and only Son to be the full payment price for all your sins and mine. Jesus was willing to be the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. God the Holy Spirit, by the power of his Word, has given us faith in Jesus as our one and only Savior. It is because of Jesus, and the “Not Guilty” verdict that he won for you and me, that we are able to say along with the Apostle Paul in words found in our Second Lesson today, “But by the grace of God I am what I am...”

Are you sure you are justified before God? When you think about how you and I are declared “Not Guilty” by our holy and just God, I encourage you to think of an arrow. Rather than seeing the arrow pointed up, loaded with all the things we have done, trying to reach heaven with our best shot, see the arrow as pointed down to your heart and mine. In his love and mercy for you and me, our Savior-God has penetrated our hearts with the arrow of his Gospel. Because of our Savior, Jesus, you and I can be sure of the forgiveness of all of our sins. Because of Jesus, you and I are justified. Because Jesus has won for us the verdict of “Not Guilty”, you and I can be sure of our place in heaven. Because of Jesus, you and I are able to join with the hymn writer when he writes:

Chief of sinners though I be,
Jesus shed His blood for me;
Died that I might live on high,
Lives that I might never die;
As the branch is to the vine,
I am His, and He is mine. Amen.