

“What kind of faith?” Luke 18:9-14

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.””

This week’s Gospel continues the same theme which we already discussed the last week. Just to remind it quickly – Jesus was telling His disciples how to a life between His first and His second coming. That, on the one hand, God’s Kingdom is already in our midst, on the other, that we are still waiting for it to be fully revealed.

Jesus encouraged us not to lose our hearts even if things are not going as well as we’d want. If our life story doesn’t exactly correspond to success stories of our times. We can still be sure, that God the Father will keep all His promises that He has given to His elect.

You are His elect, you were adopted as His children when you were baptized. That’s your assurance. Whatever happens. Whatever goes wrong. For as apostle Paul wrote, if He didn’t spare His own Son for our sake when we were sinners, how much more He will give us all things, when we are reconciled with Him through Jesus.

But the question Jesus posed at the end was whether the Son of God will find faith when He returns on earth. With this week’s parable He continues to explain what kind of faith God the Father is looking for.

What kind of faith God is looking for? This we’ll try to understand it meditating on this parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Luke introduces this parable with these words: “ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” Who were these people who thought they were righteous?

Ask yourself, where should we look when we hear that there are such people who believe themselves to be righteous and treat others with contempt? Should we think about those outside of the Church? Or maybe, we should look at others around us? Or should we look at ourselves, in our hearts?

When we read this parable it helps to clarify which people Jesus had in mind. “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

Jesus was telling this parable both to Pharisees and to His disciples. This sentence reveals us context where this parable is situated. Jesus is talking about the temple worship. About church worship, we would say today. When God had brought Israel out of Egypt He Himself established the Divine Service.

Every morning and every evening this service had to take place in the temple. You can read more about it Exodus 29. In few words, God established the ritual of atonement, where by this ritual the sins of those who repented were forgiven.

Then they could come before God with their prayers, relying not on their own righteousness, but on forgiveness of God and His gracious acceptance and love. God had promised that here, in the Divine Service, He will be present , will listen to the prayers of His faithful, and will bless them.

This temple service took place twice a day. With choir of Levites singing, with psalms read, with cymbals playing, with incense ascending to heaven, those who were present could be assured, that they sins are forgiven, that they are pleasing to God, that they can come before Him with their prayers.

Our Divine service is our heritage from the temple service. The Lord has promised that He will be here. His promise still stands, and that’s the reason we are here. Forgiveness of sins and good conscience is delivered to those who repent.

Psalms and other words of God are read and meditated upon, we are made wise to understand God’s will, ourselves, and this world, and God listens to our prayers, so that He can bless us, giving us exactly what we need.

When Jesus was telling this parable He had in mind those, who come to His house, not some seemingly righteous people somewhere else. He was talking about us, about His Church and in this parable He shows us what are two ways we can come to Him in the Church.

Let’s read once more. “The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’

We are quite quick to say that ‘o, yes, these Pharisees, they were such as hypocrites! No wonder that Jesus was bashing them.’ Don’t rush to say it! This Pharisee, he probably did everything he said.

He was fasting trying to restrain his sinful desires, and preparing himself for communication with God. He was scrupulous giving tithes of all that he got. Besides, he said that he is not like others, and probably he wasn't like other men.

He wasn't extortioner, he wasn't unjust, he wasn't adulterer, at least not in actions, and he wasn't like tax collectors who were despised by everyone as greedy and immoral traitors. Everything the Pharisee said was true.

Even now, in the temple, he tried to separate himself from those who seemed less pure. And he gave thanks to God that he was blessed not be like them. What else you can expect from exemplary believer? We could call him a righteous man, according human standards, couldn't we? He almost deserved to look at others with contempt. Didn't he?

We can often think about ourselves as righteous persons. Probably we don't fast, or maybe we sometimes do. But we can say that most of the time we are not like others. We are not extortioners, we are not that greedy, we don't sacrifice families and friends and lives of others just to get more money. It's not about us. Instead we try to give to support different causes, we are not like others.

We are quite decent people, we are not unjust, like others who twist laws or even violate them for their own interests. We don't do it. Not often, at least. We are not adulterers as those who get involved in different kind of sexual promiscuity so widespread in our culture. For we come to church and we give thanks to God. We are not like others...

But the question we need to ask is this - why didn't Jesus praise this Pharisee for a good job of being exemplary person? What should we make of His critique?

Let's look at the another gentlemen, the tax collector. What is said about him? It will help to understand Jesus' point. "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"

Picture this event! The Temple. Or a church. Choir singing, Psalms are read, incense ascends, prayers are said... and this man, he stands far off, he would not even lift up his eyes. His pose speaks volumes. He wouldn't even lift up his eyes. Instead, he was beating his breast.

What did it mean? It is not a gesture common in our culture. It wasn't common in his culture either. This gesture meant to express deep despair and anguish. Beating the breast was symbolically beating one's heart which was the source of all evil thoughts and desires.

As Jesus put it: “Out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.” (Mar 7:21-22)

The tax collector understood it. Quite certainly he wasn't as exemplary a person as the Pharisee, he wasn't as good as most of us, but contrary to the Pharisee he had understood what is our problem. Why did Christ have to die? Why do we need Him so much? It is not a lack of good and moral actions, it is this deep wickedness and corruption of our hearts. Our deepest problem lies within us, not somewhere outside.

So, what was wrong with this Pharisee? Or, what is wrong with us, when we are good people comparing to others? Remember, with this parable Jesus helps us to understand what kind of faith He is looking for.

He is looking for faith that is not afraid to admit the truth, that we are sinners, through and through. As apostle Paul wrote, there is nothing good in me. Nothing good! Of course, we don't usually do terrible things. Usually. But we don't do many of them because we are afraid of consequences.

We don't do many of them for we are taught from our childhood what is good, and what is bad. We don't do many of them for we have more or less clear picture of what does it mean to be a good person and we strive to be like one.

And regardless of all these teachings, fears, attempts to be good, our wills so often desire things we clearly know are so wrong. And we still desire them... with all our heart, and sometimes our desires take over, and destruction erupts on our lives and lives of our loved ones.

What was wrong with the Pharisee? He looked at the wrong place. Pharisee was looking at his works and praising them, the tax collector was confessing the sins of his heart. That's a difference. Jesus is looking for our hearts, not for our works, whatever shiny they may seem, for us or for others. He is looking for hearts... open and repentant hearts.

“I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified, rather than the other.” Why so? One was seemingly good guy, other - bad one. Why would the bad one go home justified? Listen to these words, they are written by Jesus beloved disciple John.

“If we say we have fellowship with Jesus while we walk in darkness (with closed hearts), we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light (with open and repentant hearts), as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and *the blood of Jesus his Son (in the Holy Communion) cleanses us from all sin.*

If we say we have no sin (the Pharisee), we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins (the tax collector), he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned (the Pharisee), we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

What a wonderful promises! “If we walk in the light of Christ (with open and repentant hearts), we have fellowship with one another, and *the blood of Jesus his Son (in the Holy Communion, which we are going to receive) His blood cleanses* us from all sin. If we confess our sins (the tax collector), Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Jesus is looking for this faith. The faith that trust in God’s faithfulness, that confesses our sins, so that Jesus can cleanse them all. That’s why He is calling us, that’s why He is coming to us in the Divine Service – to cleanse us with His holy and precious blood. Just don’t make Him a liar, instead, accept His forgiveness.

It is so hard to confess. I know, and you know it. There are sins which are so dear to us, that they are like a part of our lives. Sometimes we don’t want to leave them. Sometimes we don’t want to confess them, for they are too shameful. We just want to continue as it is.

Then think about it: God the Father, He knows your heart anyway. You can deceive yourself that you are OK, but you can’t deceive Him. And you don’t have to. For He didn’t send His Son, Jesus Christ to judge us, but to save us. To save you from your sins, from powers of darkness and to bring you into His Kingdom.

You are baptized, you are His child, you have all His promises. He knows you, and He gives His life for you... it doesn’t matter what you think of yourself, even if you think you are worthless sinner, He still loves you. You. When I say you, I mean each of you, not just persons next to you.

That’s the faith Jesus is looking for. Honest, open, repentant heart, which trust His gracious promises. When you come before Him this way, He cleanses all your sins with His blood. He desires to do it, just let Him in. Just accept His forgiveness, just let Him renew your spirit and your life. For this is why God came to earth. To save you. You.

Let us not walk in darkness, but come to Jesus, for He is faithful, so that His light can purify our hearts, that we can go home justified.

Amen.