

“I love to be a sinner” Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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.’ 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!’ 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.”

I have said it before, but I want to say it again, and again. I love confession of sins and absolution. I love it. You know, the first big part in the Divine Service, when we kneel before our Lord as on the Last Day and with repentant hearts try to be honest about what He already knows.

And I love private confession and absolution, when you really carefully examine yourself and confess your sins to your God. When you put the darkness of your heart in open, in words of confession so that the light of Christ can shine on it.

It may sound strange, but I also love to read the Commandments, I love to reflect on them, I love to prepare for the confession, I love to experience how God’s Word, the 10 Commandments reveal my sinfulness in so many ways. (We have a few of these Commandments and questions which help us to examine ourselves read during our service as we prepare for confession.)

Some may consider it strange, – what kind of weird joy one may have, when our sinfulness and failure to live God pleasing life are revealed? If you don’t know Jesus, then, of course, it seems strange, – no joy at all, just accusations.

But if you know Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and what He has done, He took upon Himself my sin and your sin and sacrificed His life so that our sins can be forgiven, then to come before Him with repentant heart is truly joyful experience.

Luther wrote that our sin is so deep a corruption that no reason can understand it, but it must be [learned and] believed from the revelation of Scriptures. And only when we begin to realize our sinfulness, only then we can begin appreciating God’s gift of forgiveness.

The worse our sickness, the happier we are to receive saving medicine, right? The clearer we see our sin and what it deserves, the more we can appreciate God’s grace, His medicine of forgiveness given to us through Jesus.

And when the Commandments help to reveal the depth of our corruption, we can truly rejoice in God's unconditional love. Because then we begin to realize that it really is unconditional.

God doesn't owe us anything. And there is not much in us that could make Him love us and care for us. But He loves you and forgives you not because of what you are, or what you have done, but because of who He is.

It is impossible to rejoice in God's forgiveness, if we think that we don't need it. But how sweet and how precious it becomes, when the illusion of our goodness fades away, and we begin to see ourselves as God sees us.

Then the truth about God's underserved mercy begins to shine brighter and brighter, and the joy of being able to hear His forgiveness multiplies. This is what our confession and absolution is about.

It is God's miracle, a powerful and life-changing action of our Creator. It helps us to experience what the holy God is like, – purifying fire of divine love, that cleanses us, sinners, and turns us into His beloved children.

Today we read this parable of Jesus, which also deals with the question of repentance and forgiveness. This parable Jesus told to a specific group of people.

To those, who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.

It's interesting that they were religious people. Very good members of society. We may want to think that Jesus spoke to those like many unbelievers in our society, who think that they are really good people.

Or we may want to think that Jesus spoke about those people who consider themselves religious, but in their own way. They don't need all this Christian stuff to be good, they think they know how to be good on their own.

And we could apply what is said in this parable to these two groups, no doubt, but the fact is that here Jesus spoke about worshippers of the true God, today it would be us, Christians. About those Christians who think that they are righteous and therefore better than others.

Let's look at this parable. Two main characters. The Pharisee and the tax collector. They both went to the Temple, to the Divine Service. Probably it was daily Temple service, either morning or evening service, which the Lord had instituted so that sacrifices for our sins could be made and forgiveness proclaimed. Pretty much what we have today.

Now, we can see how different their behavior was. The Pharisee stands apart from the others. For in his own eyes he is such a holy man, he is not going to stand

together with these sinners, adulterers, unjust and violent people, or people like this tax collector.

The Jews in the temple use to pray one of these three prayers. Confessing their sins and asking for God's forgiveness, giving thanks for God's grace, or praying for the needs of others. The Pharisee did neither.

Instead, he used his so called prayer to boast about how good he was. And now this is important, pay attention! How did he know that he was such a good person? This is important. He did what all "good people" do.

First, he compared himself with others and, second, he evaluated himself according to his own criteria. He compared himself with others, and evaluated himself according to his own criteria.

This is what all 'good people' do, I mean, those who think that they are good people. How do they know, why do they think they are good? For they compare themselves with others who are not so good.

How often have you heard anyone saying, that they have learned and understood what God expects from His human creatures, what the 10 Commandments teach us, and then they have realized how good they are? The answer is 'never'.

The point is, 'good people' never use God's criteria to evaluate themselves. Never. They can look at others and say that they are not as greedy, or lazy, or lying, or violent, or addicted, or unfaithful as the others.

Conclusion, they must be good. The other thing they do is to choose their own criteria to evaluate themselves. For example, this Pharisee. It wasn't required to fast every week, only one day before the great feasts. He had introduce something else to show how good he was.

It wasn't required to give tithes of all that he got. Again, he had come up with something new. Thus we can see that the Pharisee had made up his own commandments to follow. And now he could boast that he had done it.

It was like someone would come to the Divine Service and during the confession and absolution would boast that he attends not only one, but two churches, and that he is a member of three service organizations.

And that he does volunteer work in community, twice a week! And he is friendly and supportive and generous... not like so many others, not like those who struggle with their lives and their brokenness, and don't have much to boast about.

There is this Pharisee alive and well in all of us, especially if by God's grace we are able to live good lives serving others. Then the Pharisee tends to rise his head and adore our own goodness, comparing it with others. We are so good, we have

done such great things, aren't we such wonderful Christians?! And none of us is immune to it.

Then we have the tax collector. He doesn't dare even to come closer. He stands far off, – we could say that we, Lutherans, do it too, we like to sit at the back, – and he wouldn't even lift his eyes up, but would beat his breast saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Beating breast wasn't something common at that time. The only occasion where it is described in the New Testament besides this parable is at Jesus crucifixion, where people were in deep, deep distress seeing what was done to Jesus.

One more detail. We have in our translation “God be merciful”, where the better way to translate would be “God, atone for me”. It is not simply a cry for mercy in the midst of this life's troubles.

It is a cry for the Lamb of God to take away my sins. The tax collector recognizes who he is, he realizes what his sin deserves, and he knows that only God can help. There is not a drop of self-righteousness, not a shade of self-boastfulness.

The tax collector is an example of repentant sinner, who thirst for God's forgiveness, who doesn't rely on his own imaginary goodness, but fully trusts in God's mercy alone.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself [before God] will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself [before God] will be exalted.

There is one more last thing I want to bring to your attention. This man went down to his house justified. Word ‘justified’ may not make full sense of what Jesus was saying. Jesus is talking about being made righteous.

The Pharisee thought that he was righteous. The tax collector was made righteous. When the Bible speaks about our righteousness, it means – to be like God has created us to be.

To correspond to God's will, to God's design for our lives. See, the Pharisee was boasting that he had become righteous by what he did, when it obviously wasn't true. The tax collector was made righteous. How? we may wonder.

Remember, how did Jesus begin His ministry, what did He say? Repent and believe in the Gospel! This is exactly what the tax collector did. He came in God's presence, to the Divine Service with repentant heart, seeking God's grace and forgiveness.

And he left made righteous. God's forgiveness is what makes you righteous. To be righteous is not something we can achieve on our own, it is not about things we do. It is about our relationships with our dear Lord, Creator and Saviour.

Our sin has made us un-righteous, meaning, it has broken our relationships with God and with one another. Jesus comes to restore them. He does it by means of His forgiveness.

When we come before our God honestly admitting that we need His forgiveness, He is gracious and quick to forgive us. His forgiveness, the same that you hear in absolution, the same that you hear in sermons, the same that you receive in the Holy Communion, is what makes you righteous.

When God speaks to you His forgiveness, His Spirit does the work of new creation. He makes you righteous. Sin and guilt is taken away, and new trusting and loving relationships are established.

You see, that is such a privilege to be a sinner; for there is nothing that Jesus can do for those who think they are righteous. But if you are a sinner, if God's Word reveals your sinfulness, and you desire God's forgiveness, Jesus welcomes you.

This is why He is here. To gather sinners, to welcome those who need His forgiveness, and to make them righteous by means of His forgiveness and sending His Spirit into your hearts.

I pray that you all would love to be sinners. Not by indulging a sinful behavior, but realizing what we are before the holy God, then repenting and thirsting for His forgiveness.

For only being a sinner you can truly love Jesus forgiveness, only then you can be made righteous, and only then you can have all the joy that Jesus wants you to have.

And the peace of God that surpasses all our understanding keeps your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.

Amen.