

## **“Learning from the bad guy” 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.”**

Our today’s Gospel reading speaks about the profound reality of human existence. About these deep, deep forces that drive and guide our lives. About these very powerful forces that are present and active in everyone’s life.

What are they? The New Testament calls this reality “the law written on our hearts”. God’s law written on human hearts. Or we could say, the Creator’s will for our lives engraved into our very being. How do we experience it?

How do these forces manifest themselves in our daily lives? We experience them as our conscience, which sometimes accuses us when we have done something wrong, or have failed to do what we had to. Or sometimes it excuses and praises us, when we have done the right things.

These forces manifest themselves as this mechanism of evaluation that drives and guides us. We constantly evaluate ourselves. There is nothing we can do about it. This sense of accountability, this need to be good, to appear good, it is built into us. We can’t erase it. We can’t switch this function off.

And we constantly evaluate others. And we compare ourselves with others. All the time. All human beings share this experience. It doesn’t matter whether people are religious or non-religious. There is no escaping from these forces.

The Scripture teaches us that these forces, this sense of accountability, this ongoing self-evaluation simply reveals who we are as human beings. God’s creatures, created to act according to our Creator’s design for our lives.

It reveals that we will be held responsible for how we have spent the time given to us, what we have done with our lives, how well we have fulfilled the will of our Creator. This is what this need to be good truly is about.

Now, in our today’s Gospel reading Jesus shows that we can divide all people into two categories, with regards to how they choose to deal with these forces. We could call them the good guys and the bad guys. At least in their own eyes.

“Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” One category, as Jesus puts it, are those who trust in themselves that

they are or can be righteous. The good guys, that is, in their own eyes. And what Jesus says in this parable was addressed mostly to these people.

The other category are those who, who know that they are neither righteous nor good, that they can't trust in themselves, they need to trust in God to declare them righteous, to declare them good. These are the bad guys. The Pharisee in this parable represents the good guys, the tax collector the bad guys. Now...

“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.’

That's quite a vivid picture. Location for the action of this parable is the Temple worship. Or today's analogy would be the Divine Service, the Church's worship service. Now about this first category, the so-called good guys.

We could say that broadly speaking this category includes all who would trust in themselves, that they can be good enough by how they live, – the secular people, the followers of others religions, but also many who would consider themselves Christians.

This parable also explains why they believe that they can be good on their own. Even as the law of God is written on their hearts, and forces them to evaluate themselves, and to strive to lead good lives, they actually do not evaluate themselves according to God's law.

Instead they evaluate themselves according to their own criteria and also comparing with others. “‘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.’” And he said it all aloud, so that everyone would know that he was the good guys.” So much humility...

But isn't this too familiar? Isn't this what we witness so often? Every person who believes that they don't need to repent and that they don't need God's grace and forgiveness will do the same two things.

They will compare themselves with others. “I am not as bad as that person... there are many who are worse than I am...”. This is such a smart approach, for there will always be someone worse than we are, at least in some ways.

And then these people use these self-chosen criteria to show how good they are. It is easier and easier these days to demonstrate that you are the good guy. You don't even need to do anything. You just need to say the correct things.

“I am all for love and equality and justice... I am not a hater like many others... I am inclusive and tolerant... and I care for environment... by calling other people names on social media... and I don't eat meat... and I don't judge people... maybe just sometimes... but then they deserve it...”.

How many today in our society would believe they are good, based on these simple criteria?! I am afraid that too, far too many. But let us not get distracted. Jesus wasn't telling this parable to the world.

He specifically addressed those in the Temple, or we could say – those who call themselves Christians, but yet believe that they can be good on their own. Are we free from such attitudes?

I don't know about you, but I know for sure that I am not. This is scary, how twisted our hearts are. When I manage to do something, that I believe is really good, something that indeed would be in accord with the will God, something that would a blessing for many others – do you know what happens?

I begin to do exactly what Jesus rebuked the people of the first category. I begin to look down at others and treated others with contempt. That's right. Instead of being humble and grateful that our gracious Lord has used me for something good, I begin to think highly about myself and look with contempt to those who haven't done as much as I have. It's miserable...

“Thanks God that I am not like others, who are stingy with their money! Thanks God that I am not like others, who don't enjoy learning the Scriptures as much as I do! Thanks God that I am not like others, who don't do all the things that I try to do... and so on...”.

I am quite sure that there is this little, and something not so little a Pharisee in each one of us. I pray that the Word of God and the Holy Spirit would help us to see it... so that we are not deceived to trust ourselves.

“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!’” Sure, he was a sinner. The bad guy. That would be rather obvious to everyone.

The thing is, it is for us easier to see our sins, if they are ugly and visible to everyone. It is much more challenging if you have grown up in a nice neighbourhood, and taught to be a nice person from early childhood.

Then without the help of the Holy Spirit, it can be very hard to see that in our hearts, we are not much different from this tax collector, or others visible sinners, the bad guys of this world.

The tax collector was standing far off. He didn't feel worthy even to be among other worshippers. He would not even lift up his eyes. So ashamed, so embarrassed, so struck he was because of his sinfulness.

He would beat his breast, and that was the gesture of despair ... admitting that there is nothing that he can do about the evil passions, about the shameful desires and thoughts that dwelt in his heart... “God be merciful to me, a sinner!”

The actual Greek work is not “be merciful to me”, it is – “atone for me!” That was a desperate cry from someone who clearly knew that there was nothing

good in him. Who cried out realizing that he couldn't be good on his own: "Lord, please, do something about it, take away my sin, give me a new heart!"

The Holy Spirit had revealed this man the truth about his situation. The Holy Spirit had revealed that when evaluated according to God's criteria, according to God's commandments, he stood no chance on the Last Day.

He couldn't pull his sinful heart out of his chest, he couldn't quench the shameful thoughts and desires that came out of it, he knew he needed someone else to help him. He couldn't trust himself. He could only hope in gracious God.

The great wisdom was given to the tax collector. The great wisdom and great mercy – to know what his sickness was – sin. And to know the only one who could heal it – the true God, our Creator and Redeemer.

We should pray that our Father and our Lord Jesus are gracious to us, that they give us abundantly the same wisdom and the same humility that the tax collector had. For that is what our God, what Jesus is looking for.

"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."

We can hear this great crowd of God's chosen people speaking to us in the Scripture, including prophets and apostles, including John the Baptist and Jesus Himself, all of them saying: "Repent, repent and believe in the Gospel!"

Admit that you are a sinner, that you can't not be good on your own, and that you deserve God's punishment. And then – believe in the Gospel! Hear and believe in the Good News, that God Himself, in Jesus, has taken your place, that He has taken responsibility for everything where we have failed.

That He has already receive the just punishment on behalf of us, and that He offers you forgiveness of all your sins. As His gift. That Jesus comes and speaks on behalf of God the Father: "I forgive you all your sins, I declare that you are good, I make you a new creation – very good in my eyes." This is who you are.

How blessed we are that every week in His grace our God helps us to experience both, the moment of truth – "I am a sinner" – and the moment of God's grace and the miracle of His new creation – "I forgive you all your sins, you are good, you are a new creation, go in peace!"

This is what the confession and absolution in our services is about. Confession of our sinfulness, as imperfect as it may be, and hearing of God's life-giving grace and forgiveness, perfect in its power.

It is such a joy, to be able to be honest with our God, for He knows our hearts already, and to be able to hear Him declaring us to be good, despite that fact that there is nothing good in me. This is what trusting our God is like.

I pray that we all would learn from the bad guy in the parable, from the tax collector, I pray that the Holy Spirit is gracious to us, and doesn't leave us trusting in ourselves.

I pray that He would enlighten us with God's Word, with the Gospel so that similarly as our brother – the tax collector, we could return home with joy, knowing that we have been declared good and righteous.

Not by ourselves, but by our Creator and our Redeemer. Amen.