

“Community of grace.” 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.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today’s Gospel reading reminds us that we need to thank our God... daily!

It is so good to be people of God, isn’t it? We are reminded of it all the time. Look at what the society is like! It’s terrible! It’s appalling... Ugly manifestations of sin everywhere we look. Greed and covetousness, people are trying to devour one another, cheating, deceiving.

But also, promiscuity... adultery... total mess in relationships. All the boundaries not only of decency, but also of sanity are being torn down. Indifference about others, divisions, promotion of selfish interests, manipulations, coercion, corruption at every level. So much lies that we need to face every day. It is good to be people of God.

Thanks be to God we are not like them! We worship, and we give to support the Church, and we give to other good causes, and sometimes we read the Bible, and we don’t do the things that the crazy world around us does.

We want to make our congregations safe places for others, except for those who are really bad people. And when our government tells us what to do, we are happy to go an extra mile. They say: “Jump!” And we gladly reply: “Sure, how high!”

Thanks be to God that we are not like those others!

If you felt uncomfortable hearing this, thanks be to God! For wait! – why was Jesus telling this parable? Who did He speak to? He wasn’t talking to those outside, He wasn’t criticizing the society, He was talking to the religious people, to the best, most moral religious people of His time.

He wasn’t criticizing the unbelievers, He was challenging those fervently religious folk, who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” We could say that He was talking to the Church people... Sadly, but what this parable reveals, it is our natural state. Our sinful state, our twisted and proud hearts. This is how we naturally want to see ourselves and others. The need

to be good, it is built into us. All people have it. All people want to be seen as good, to be thought of as good. And how can we get there? The Pharisee in the parable demonstrates it perfectly. We want to feel good, righteous, and we achieve it by...

No, not by keeping God's law, but by comparing ourselves with others, and keeping our own self-made laws. I have yet to meet someone who would prayerfully reflect on God's law as given in the Ten Commandments and then would declare: "Yes, surely I have kept all of these, I am good!"

Remember, what did the Pharisee do? "Thanks God, that I am not like... those!" We all do this. That's a very convenient approach. There is always someone who is worse than us at least in some respect. "Yes, I do this, but I never do that!"

"Yes, I take bribes, but I am a faithful husband and a good father." "Yes, I sleep around, who doesn't, but I don't beat others up." "I may get into fight from time to time, but at least I don't lie all the time like many others do, I am honest."

"Yes, I did abortion, for I couldn't afford a child, but at least I am better than those parents who don't provide for their children." "Sure, I drink too much, but at least I don't take anything stronger, as other do."

"I don't get to the church, but I still try to lead good life, not like many others." We could go on and on. How many times you have heard this? How many times we have said this or something along these lines? Who could count...

This is what makes us feel good, righteous – comparing with others, and perhaps, keeping our own rules. "I fast twice a week, and give the tenth of everything." "I never judge others." "I always help people." "I never vote for those crooks." Etc.

How sad if Christians let this mindset, this old sinful heart to prevail. And, surely, it happens with all of us. We are not somehow immune to this. But just think about this; how would those congregations who embrace this kind of Pharisaic thinking, how would they look like? How would they treat others?

Similarly, as the Pharisee. Looking down on others. Trying to separate themselves from those who are less perfect. Less holy. Condemning and criticizing. "If we are better, then we deserve God's favour, but those others, they don't."

Such congregations don't want to mix with sinners of this world. They want to keep themselves separate and pure, according to their own standards. Isolated.

Remember, the Pharisee didn't think: "How can I reach out to that poor guy?"

How can I bring him the good news, how can I care for him and transform his life with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How can I help him to receive the fullness of God's grace and mercy? Dear Lord, help me and guide me!" No, none of that...

"Thanks God I am not like him!" The churches who embrace that mindset, they die. In their self-righteousness, cutting themselves off from those whom they deem not worthy. From those, who need to hear the Gospel of God's grace the most.

Christians have often been accused of being hypocritical, pharisaic, etc. And often it probably has been quite well deserved. For we fail to live as people of grace. There is a little or not so little Pharisee in each one of us.

Okay, maybe there are exceptions. But certainly, there is one in me. Not so little at that. I see this principle at work in me from time to time. The more I succeed in doing something that I consider quite a good and godly deed, the more impatient I become towards those who may not be up to their game.

Instead of being grateful for what the Lord has given me to accomplish, I tend to become critical towards those who may not be able to live up to my standards. It's terrible. "Thanks God that I am not like them!" I need to repent.. O how I need it! You see, this is our natural state, sinful state. That's what our old hearts are like.

But then, Jesus talks about a miracle. About miracle and mystery. About the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. We don't know how it happens. We sort of know that the Spirit comes together with God's Word.

The tax collector. We may assume that he was somehow a terrible person. But Jesus doesn't say that. Surely, they were not the favourites of the Jewish society, but that's doesn't necessarily mean he was somehow worse than others.

We don't know what had happened, we don't know how the Holy Spirit worked His magic, but this man was transformed to the depth of his heart. He was completely changed. The old self-righteous self was stripped away. He could have easily said:

"Thanks God, that I am not like others. Sure, there are some dark shadows when it comes to my occupation, but at least I am not as arrogant and boastful as that Pharisee. I just do what it takes to provide for my family." There was none of that...

He was drawn to God's temple. He desperately longed to be in God's presence. But at the same time, he clearly realized that he was not worthy, he was not good enough, there was nothing that he could boast about before God. Nothing...

His new heart told him that it is meaningless to compare himself with others trying to look better. In deep grief about the state of his own heart, he was beating his chest. It wasn't a common practice. It was unusual, an expression of truly contrite heart, of broken spirit... of someone who in humility was asking for God's mercy.

"Lord, be gracious to me! Don't be angry! Don't reject me! Don't push me away!"

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." "Lord, forgive me!"

The mysterious power of the Holy Spirit. It changes everything. We do need to thank our God for it every day. For this gift of the Holy Spirit. For the quiet work of God's Spirit within us. We need to thank Him and ask to continue His work in us.

So that we are purified of all pride and self-righteousness, that we may see clearly our sinful condition in the blazing light of God's law. So that we can delight in God's grace and overflow in thankfulness for everything that He has done for us.

How different would then our congregations be?

When the Spirit transforms us this way, then we recognize that, first, all human creatures are precious in God's eyes. Infinitely precious. But also, that despite our different life stories, our hearts, our inner beings are very similar.

That we all carry the curse of sin in us, that there is no one who is righteous before God on our own. Not one! But that our gracious God desires everyone to be saved, everyone! Our good Lord Jesus sacrificed His life for everyone.

For every human being. For you and also for them – for the worst people you know, for those who have hurt you the most. Then we recognize that we are no better just because by God's grace we have received more blessings. If anything, that should make us more humble and incredibly grateful, that He has been so good to us.

When the Holy Spirit changes us this way, then along the way He creates the most beautiful community of grace where everyone is welcomed. Every sinner. Every tax collector and every Pharisee. Everyone...

Where instead of boasting in our own goodness and trying to separate ourselves from others, we rejoice in God's grace; where we look at our fellows who don't know God as their loving Father, who doesn't know Jesus as their loving Brother, and our hearts are in pain and anguish. We want to help them.

For we see them as our lost brothers and sisters. We see them as God's beloved, for now held captives by sin and death and devil. Where we pray and do whatever we can to bring them the truth and grace and beauty of our Triune God.

Thus, we become a community of God's people, brought together and kept together by God's grace. By grace alone. We may have been bad like tax collectors, we may have been proud and self-righteous like the Pharisee, you know who you are.

But our gracious Jesus is not picky. He called Matthew the tax collector, and He called Paul the Pharisee. He has called me, despite everything that I have done, and he has called you. And He is calling everyone, everyone who has ears to listen.

He reigns as gracious Lord. He conquers this world with His grace. With His grace He transforms us from Pharisees and tax collectors and adulterers, from extortioners and unjust into... His beloved children. Into His community of grace.

God, be merciful to us, sinners! Sure, we don't deserve it, we are no better than others! But if that is Your good and gracious will, grant us opportunity to be what You want us to be, a community of grace, where everyone is welcomed... for it is You, who call everyone.

Amen.