

Luke 18:9-14

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

26 October 2025

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

In nomine...

Lord, I thank you that I am not like... fill in the blank. It is not too hard to think of people that we are glad we are not like these days. And if we are honest, it can feel pretty good to judge ourselves against those people. They are the worst. Have you seen how *they* are ruining our country? Those feckless Democrats who shut our government down just so that they could keep giving your hard-earned tax dollars to illegal immigrants. The nasty Republicans who just want to disappear every person of color in this country, while installing a de-facto King in the Whitehouse. The horrible global south Anglicans who are choosing schism over unity. The out of touch liberal Episcopalians who keep choosing social concerns of the Gospel.

I do not need to keep going, you get the point. There are polarizing, divisive opinions are all around us. We cannot escape them. They are on Facebook, the nightly news, the Substacks we read – all around us folks are pushing an agenda to drive us further and further from one another. No matter how much we try to shut out the noise of the world, it just keeps knocking at the door, telling us to hate and to judge our neighbor.

And slowly, often without our even noticing, that message starts to take root in our hearts. We make jokes about people we dislike, without thinking. We turn off our lights and pretend we are not home, rather than sit down over tea with our neighbor whose politics are not like ours. We share distasteful and disparaging social media posts about those we have been taught to dislike. When no one is around we raise our hands in the air and say, “Thank you God, that I am not a liberal or a conservative or black or white or gay or straight or a Steelers fan – whatever it is.” Because we know that we are better than them. We are more righteous than them. We, not them, we are the people that God truly loves.

This progression is what has happened to our friend the Pharisee we meet in the Temple this morning. We must remember, my friends, that the Pharisees are the good guys in Jesus' time. They are the ones who go to Temple (read: Church), they are the ones who give of their wealth to care for the poor and the widow, they are the ones who fast to grow closer to God. The Pharisee this morning, is so close to doing the right thing. His prayer was so very close to being acceptable to God. His problem is that he began to believe his own hype. He believed that he was righteous and this was the beginning of his downfall.

The second thing it is important to remember this morning friends, is that tax collectors are not pitiable figures. The man who shows up in the back of the Temple is not a person that anyone hearing the parable for the first time would be inclined to have sympathy for. Tax collectors were cheats, they were thieves, they strong-armed folks out of their money – they made their money by taking extra money, on top of the taxes that they were tasked with collecting. No one liked them. No one thought they were good people. No one thought that they were capable of contrition—and yet, here he is. Praying. Simply. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I am willing to assume from

his prayer, that he went home and gave up his life as a tax collector. And thus, we hear Jesus say that this man, not the Pharisee, went home justified. He went home justified, because he changed.

In this parable our Lord shows us two things. One – no person, no matter how righteous they are is above reproach. Two – no person, no matter how terrible their actions may be is beyond salvation. Each of us is capable of falling and each of us is capable of repenting and changing our lives. The Pharisee was terribly close to a perfect prayer; he just put the period in the wrong place. I will read it again to refresh your memory, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

Had he put the period after *you* his prayer would have been perfect. God, I thank you. Perfection. An older priest once said to me that there is no greater prayer than to say thank you to God – and I believe it to be so.

The core of our worship lives is thanksgiving. Eucharist means thanksgiving. We are here this morning to give thanks to God. And we should not be thieves, rogues, or adulterers. We should fast. We should be regular in prayer and corporate worship. We should give of our resources for the building of the Kingdom of God through the work of the church. But we those things should not be sources of pride, because we can only do them through the grace of God. And for that we give thanks.

Another thing that I believe to be true, is that each of us falls short of the glory of God. We are—in ways big and small sinful. And for that we should learn the prayer of the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” His prayer forms the basis for what is widely known as the Jesus prayer, which is in my preferred translation – Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. When we pray this prayer do not do it while beating ourselves up or belittling ourselves, do it while honestly taking an accounting of our shortcomings and sinfulness. The ways small and great that we do not earnestly and fully honor the image of God we were created in.

If we pray these two prays every day—our lives will never be the same. We will not hate our neighbor. We will not give into the temptation to judge others. We will be justified in our prayers. God, I thank you. Amen. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. Amen. These two prayers are the beginning of a revolution. Join it my friends. Repent. Give thanks. And be welcomed into the holy of holies, by our Lord.

In nomine...