

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Ash Wednesday – March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017

### **Luke 18:9-14**

**To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

Dear Children of our heavenly Father,

Almost 500 years ago, the world was turned upside down—not with a weapon of mass destruction but with an instrument of mass instruction—a man’s pen. A monk (technically a friar) by the name of Martin Luther penned 95 theses, or propositions, and nailed them to the university bulletin board of his day—the Castle Church door. Luther penned these theses for debate among the professional theologians of his day. At the theses’ heart was this practical question: What does it mean to repent?

*In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (Luther, 95 Theses, No. 1)*

Almost 500 years later, we are here on Ash Wednesday, not to debate theses but to confess our sins; not to nail words to a door but to hear words preached from a pulpit. Repentance is on our minds as another Lenten season begins. Repentance is on Jesus’ mind too. Tonight, he teaches us a key truth about repentance, not by debating 95 theses but by teaching us a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray. As we listen in on their prayers, we will come to a better understanding of what it means to repent so that we can make our entire lives lives of repentance. May the Holy Spirit bless every one of you with a repentant heart tonight—a heart that

**Theme: Repent: Turn to Jesus and Not to Yourself**

- 1. We are not righteous**
- 2. Jesus’ righteousness covers all our sins**

As we think of Jesus’ parable, picture a lamb burning on the temple altar as the sun is sinking low in the sky. Can you smell the incense wafting in the breeze? As you elbow your way through the mass of humanity in the temple courts, your focus narrows to a single man in that crowd. He spends plenty of time

in the temple. He is well dressed in flowing robes. He's all business—a religious professional from head to toe. He stands up, perhaps in the middle of the crowd, so that he can be clearly seen and heard. Then your eye catches another man over in the corner. He's a tax collector—probably a tax cheat! No one would ever accuse him of being a saint. He is all alone. He is in rough shape. Can you see that picture?

The Pharisee had plenty to pray about. But did you notice what the Pharisee's favorite word was? Lord? Heal? Help? Forgive? No, it was an ugly, all-consuming *I*. **I thank you. . . . I'm not like other men. . . . I fast twice a week. . . . I give a tenth of all I get. . . .** The Pharisee is celebrating his own little "thanksgiving day" in the temple courts! He is most thorough when it comes to thanking God for himself, but he is absolutely amnesic when it comes to remembering God's blessings. He doesn't ask for a single thing from the heavenly Father, because he figures that he pretty much has everything he needs; even more, he IS EVERYTHING God wants! How lucky God was to have a guy like the Pharisee on his side! He wasn't a robber. He was a big giver! He wasn't a glutton. He was a disciplined faster! He wasn't a man of the sinful masses. No, he was a spiritual cut above the rest! The Pharisee was doing just fine in his own estimation. Why bother turning to God in repentance when one can turn to himself and his own holiness for salvation?!

And then there is the other man in the parable: not a Pharisee but a publican; not a man full of himself but a man running on empty; not a man praying to be praised but a man praying to be forgiven; not a man bragging but a man repenting; a man turning—not toward himself but toward God!

In a time when most praying took place with heads held up toward heaven, the tax collector looked down in shame. At a time when most praying took place with hands held out, this man's hands were clenched into fists that beat his chest in grief. His prayer? Short and simple: **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** Literally, the tax collector was praying: *"God be appeased . . ."* He knew there was nothing he could do to appease the wrath of God against his sin—praying and paying, fasting and washing could never make his sin "right" in God's sight. He wasn't the solution. He would have to turn toward another. God himself would have to appease his wrath toward sin! That's precisely what Isaiah wrote, **"He [the Lord] saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him"** (Isa 59:16). Tonight, we come to commemorate our Lord's work of appeasing himself—through the suffering and death of his dear Son. Ash Wednesday—Christ's great Lenten suffering and sacrifice—is a yearly answer, no, the ETERNAL answer, to the tax collector's prayer!

So let me ask you this: Whom do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning? In your deepest heart of hearts, do you identify more with the Pharisee or the tax collector? Think of it. We're Lutheran—Wisconsin Synod to boot. I might not fast twice a week, but I wasn't down in New Orleans yesterday celebrating Fat Tuesday either. I might not give a tenth of all I get, but I have my envelope with me tonight. I know that I'm saved by grace alone . . . and God also knows that I'm doing my best! What more could he possibly want? If we are quick and confident in identifying with the tax collector, then be very careful of being too humble—something that the Pharisees were good at too.

Brothers and sisters, this Ash Wednesday, will you trade in your soft, comfortable security blankets of self-righteousness for the sackcloth and ashes of genuine repentance? Why? Because turning toward ourselves isn't only sinful; it's nonsensical! Do you really think God is pleased that you are sitting in a pew right now? Anyone can do that! Do you really think God is comparing you favorably over and against

the Fat Tuesday drunks on Bourbon Street from last night? Isn't God, instead, comparing you with his holy self (Mt 5:48)? Do you really think that God is impressed with offering envelopes? Why should he be impressed with an envelope in the offering plate when he wants 100 percent of the heart in your chest? Could it be—just maybe—that God has a right to be sick and tired of us turning toward ourselves for vindication rather than turning toward him for salvation? Mercifully, the Lord rips the security blanket of self-righteousness from our sinful fingers: **“All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

The Pharisee thought he was God's right-hand man. He thanked God that he wasn't a robber; however, in his heart, he was. Jesus once told the Pharisees: **“Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness” (Lk 11:39)**. The Pharisee fancied himself righteous. He wasn't. Jesus said, **“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.”** The Pharisee considered himself faithful and free of all adultery. Sadly, he had cheated, not on his wife but on his God as he carried on a long, passionate love affair with himself. The point? Man at his “best” is man at his most dishonest! The Pharisee's self-confidence is nothing but a false security of peace. Turning toward yourself simply serves as a detour on the road to hell—a place where the Pharisee has been humbled for the last 2,000 years.

The tax collector? He was humble. The Lord exalted him. The tax collector knew his sin. The Lord forgave him. In turning to Jesus, the tax collector was exalted! How? By Jesus' own role reversal. The Lord of heaven became the criminal on the cross. The God who fills the universe filled a tomb. The Lord of glory became the Suffering Servant so that the Father's wrath against sin could be appeased. Appeased, not by ignoring sin, but by punishing our sin in his Son. Jesus became the Chief of sinners upon the cross so that you and I—chiefs of sinners—could become sons and daughters. Listen and be amazed at Jesus' role reversal. Our Lord is the ultimate example of the humble being exalted.

**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!**

**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Php 2:5-11)**

The tax collector's God, YOUR God, has been appeased by the death of his Son in our place. So with repentant hearts, turn to him who sacrificed himself for you! With grateful hearts, receive his mercy anew every morning. With expectant hearts, look forward to Easter victory!

Jesus taught, and Luther believed, that a Christian's entire life is a life of repentance—a lifelong turning away from ourselves and our works and a turning toward Christ and his work. It is not in the goodness of your works; the earnestness of your prayers; the zeal that you have for the Lord's work; or the love and commitment that you have for your family, your church, or your country that saves you—not in

the least.

The humble cross of Christ saves you! Like the tax collector in the corner, the cross doesn't look like much. But look closer, because in the cross you find the Almighty appeased, a Father's forgiveness, your God's goodness, your Lord's love, and your repentant prayers answered! Turn to him. And only him. Always him. Amen.