

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY; LUKE 18:9-14.

Contents: The pharisee and the publican.

Luke 18:9-14 K.J.V.

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon 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 every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

1. This Gospel brings two extraordinary persons to our notice, or two kinds of people from the multitude called the people of God, who would be God's servants and come before him seeking righteousness. And the two kinds of righteousness, which are found on earth, are also represented; the one, which makes a great show before all the world and in the eyes of men, and yet before God it amounts to nothing, and is therefore condemned; the other, which is not known among men, and yet before God it is called righteousness and is pleasing in his sight. The one is that of the beautiful, proud saint, the Pharisee; the other, that of the poor, humble, sorrowing sinner, the publican.

2. We also hear two wonderful, strange sentences of judgment, wholly and entirely opposed to human wisdom and the whims of reason, hard and terrible to all the world, which condemns the great saints as unjust, and declares the poor sinners acceptable,

righteous and holy. But, as the text itself shows, he speaks of such saints who trusted in themselves to find a righteousness in their own lives and works, which God was bound to respect; and again of such sinners, who from their hearts desired to become? free from their sins, and long for forgiveness and the grace of God. For nothing is said here of that other great multitude in the world, who are like neither this publican nor this Pharisee, who care nothing at all, either for sin or grace, but continue in security and wickedness, without inquiring after any God, heaven or hell.

3. Of the two kinds of persons among the Jews, the Pharisees and publicans, we have sufficiently heard in another place, namely, that the name Pharisee means the very first, most upright and pious people, who with all earnestness endeavored to serve God, and to keep the law, as St. Paul also boasts of himself, that before his conversion he was one of them, Philippians 3:5.

4. Again, the name “publican” among them meant a man living in open sin and vice, and served neither God nor man, and was only busy to rob, to oppress and harm his neighbor, as they were forced to do in their occupation which they bought from the Romans for great sums of money, if they desired fully to take advantage of it. In short, they were people who were regarded as no better than public, godless heathen, even though they were Jews by birth, as Christ also compares them to Gentiles, Matthew 18:17: *“And if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.”*

5. It is indeed wonderful that Christ brings two such persons together, who are so entirely different and the farthest removed from each other; and still more wonderful, and even offensive, that he expresses such weighty Judgments, wholly condemning the Pharisee and declaring the publican just. Although he plainly speaks thus of both, nevertheless he shows that he does not reject, nor desire to have rejected such works of which the Pharisee here boasts; for he represents and sets him forth as a beautiful saint, with works that are neither to be rebuked nor punished, but that are good and worthy of praise, On the other hand he can neither boast of nor praise the publican for his life and works, for he is himself forced to confess before God, and to condemn himself as a sinner, and can think of no good he has done. And yet Christ thus searches, proves and examines both, and finds nothing good in the holy Pharisee, although he did many costly works, not on account of the works, which in themselves are not wrong; but because the person was not good but full of iniquity. While on the other hand in the publican who hitherto had been a public, condemned sinner, he now finds a real good tree and good fruit, although he does not shine forth with the great works of the Pharisee. Wherefore let us in brief consider both persons.

6. First of all you must properly magnify and adorn the Pharisee, as Christ presents him with his beautiful life; for here you have a man who dares to stand before God, and praise his life in the divine presence. This can never be intended as a false praise, but is meant in all earnestness and truth. He appeals to himself as a witness, and is willing to announce himself before God and be found in the true worship, and give an account of his entire life, that it is spent in obedience to God. He begins with the highest and first commandment, and shows himself as one who worships the true and only God, and seeks first of all his kingdom and his will; he confesses that he has everything from God, what he is and lives, he brings all back to him and thanks him for all he has given him, especially for this particular grace and kindness that he preserves him from sin and shame, that he is not like the public sinners and publicans, and prays that God may preserve him in this, and further grant unto him his grace and goodness. Here you see nothing but beautiful works of the first table of the law, of all three commandments; for hereby he also observes the Sabbath, because he goes into the temple only to seek God and to pray.

7. He later goes further into the second table, and purifies his conscience before God and the world, in that he is not unjust, a robber, adulterer, like the great majority of people. Here the other five commandments are taken together, so that he is a man who can boast of himself before all the world, that he has done no one wrong, violence or pain, nor oppressed or offended against the fifth, sixth and eighth commandments, and in this connection he dares to defy everyone to prove anything different against him. Besides he has strictly kept the sixth commandment, he has not committed adultery or led an unchaste life, but kept his body in subjection and discipline, and also fasted twice every week, which was not a false fasting, as that of our priests and monks chiefly is, but a real fasting as the Jews observed from morning until evening, to the going down of the sun. Above all this, that he was not only not unjust, nor an extortioner of his neighbor's goods and honor, but gave the tenth of all he had honestly and fairly earned, and by this also yields his obedience to God, and gives for the support of divine worship and the priestly office of all that God gave him, and does not lay up anything in a niggardly or miserly spirit.

8. Here you view all the commandments together, and he appears to the world a paragon of godliness, a fine, pious, godfearing and holy man, who is to be applauded as a mirror and an example for the whole world, that they might well desire, and it would indeed be well to desire, and the world would be very lovely if it had many such people.

9. Now contrast the publican with this picture, and you will see there is no resemblance to the holy Pharisee; for even his name at once indicates that little virtue or honor can be

found in him, and no one could regard him as inquiring much after God or his commandments; and he does not only fail to give any of his goods for the service of God, but even publicly robs and steals from his neighbor; and in short he is a man who with his sinful life is a public and known example; as the Pharisee also informs him, that he is depraved and godless, his conscience is depraved, and there is no good to hope from him.

10. Now how does it happen so contrary, that the Pharisee is condemned of God and the publican is justified? Will God now speak and decide against his own law, which justly prefers those who live according to it, to those who live opposed to it in open sin? Or does God delight in those who do no good and are nothing but robbers, adulterers and unjust? By no means, but we have here quite another and higher law than the world or flesh and blood understand, which looks deeper into the hearts of both these persons, and finds in the Pharisee a great evil principle which destroys all that otherwise might be called good, which the Evangelist calls, to trust in self and despise others.

11. Such is the reproach of this fine man and rogue, who is great before the world. Would to God that this one were the only one, and he had not left so many children and heirs. For the whole world with the best there is in it, is altogether drowned in this vice; it will not and cannot forsake it. Where it knows of any good it possesses, it exalts itself, and despises others who have it not, and exalts itself above God and man; and even though they pretend to keep God's commandments they transgress them, as St. Paul says of his Jews, Romans 9:31, that they truly, in striving after the law of righteousness, have not attained to righteousness. What a wonderful thing it is, that those who diligently hold to the law, and worship God to a great extent, are not those who keep the law, as Paul in Galatians 6:13 says: "*For not even they who receive circumcision do themselves keep the law,*" etc. Those are strange saints indeed, who even in doing according to the law, do not keep it but violate it. Who then are those who keep it?

12. This Pharisee and those like him, with their fine discipline and honor, which is truly an excellent, glorious and beautiful gift, which must be praised and esteemed in the world above everything else as the greatest gift of God, more beautiful than all other beauty and ornament, gold and silver, yea, than even the light of the sun. Of him, I say, the sentence is spoken, that before God he is worse than a robber, a murderer and an adulterer. Whither shall we now go with this doctrine among the great multitude of this world, whom we ourselves condemn on account of their public contempt of God and all wickedness against God and the people, which also cries to heaven and drowns everything that the earth can scarcely bear it?

13. Well, I said before, that the Pharisee is neither censured nor condemned because he does the works of the law, or else we would have to condemn God's gift and his law, and praise the contrary. Yet this I say, that here the person is placed before the judgment seat of God, and finds it different there than before the judgment of this world, that although he has indeed some beautiful, praiseworthy gifts, yet a great blot of shame cleaves to them, because he misuses these gifts, and in God's sight is entirely destroyed by them. For with these gifts he is here accused of transgressing against both God and man, against both tables of the law. For in the first commandment especially and in the highest terms, presumption is forbidden, that a man should not trust in himself or in his own gifts, or take pleasure in himself; as this work righteous person does, who struts forth and is tickled with the gifts he has received from God, and makes an idol of them and worships himself, as though he were the excellent holy man, whom alone God is bound to respect and honor.

14. This is already the great sin and vice where he runs counter against God himself, of course blind and hardened, like an unbelieving heathen or Turk, who knows nothing of God, is without repentance, and on account of his great holiness will know nothing of sin, and fears not the wrath of God. He presumes to stand firm by his own works, and does not see that he and all men, even the true saints themselves with all their own righteousness and life, cannot stand before God; but are guilty of his wrath and condemnation, as David testifies in Psalm 130:3: *"If thou, Jehovah, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?"* And Psalm 143:2: "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight no man living is righteous." Therefore he does not seek either grace or forgiveness of sins, nor does it occur to him that he stands in need of them.

15. Now since he sins so monstrously against the first and highest commandment, in shameful and horrible idolatry, presumption and defiance, depending on his own holiness, and as there is here no fear of God, neither trust nor love, but he seeks only his own honor and praise, we must conclude that he does not honestly and from the heart observe any of the other commandments, and all is false and lies that he pretends with his prayers and worship, and thereby in the highest degree misuses and disgraces the name of God to adorn his lies, and thereby only brings down upon himself God's wrath and severe condemnation; as God has declared that whoever taketh his name in vain shall not go unpunished. For what else is it, but to blaspheme and defy the lofty majesty of God, when he prays and says: I thank thee, God, that I am so holy and good, that I never need thy grace; but I find so much in myself, that I have kept the law, and you cannot accuse me of anything, and I have deserved so much, that you are bound to repay and reward me again for it in time and in eternity, if you would keep your own honor, and be a just and truthful God.

16. In like manner see how he rumbles and blusters also in the second table of the law against his neighbor; for neither is there here any Christian love or faithfulness by which one could trace that he sought and favored his neighbor's honor and salvation; but he basely goes to work and tramples him under his feet by his shameful contempt, and does not consider him worthy to be regarded as a human being; yea, when he should help and serve his neighbor, so that no wrong or harm be done him, he himself does him the greatest wrong. For when he sees and knows that his neighbor sins against God, he does not think how he can convert and save him from the wrath of God and condemnation, that he may reform; he has no mercy or sympathy in t, is heart for the distress and affliction of a poor sinner, and thinks that he is rightly and justly served, in that he is left in his condemnation and destruction, and withdraws from him all the duties of love and service God has commanded him to perform, that above all things he might bring his neighbor from his sins and condemnation into the kingdom of God by teaching, admonition, rebuke and reformation, etc. ; and what is the worst of all, he is glad and of good courage, because his neighbor is under the power of sin and the wrath of God. Thus one can indeed trace what desire and love he has for God's law, and how much of an enemy he is to vice.

17. For of what use can such a man be in the kingdom of God, who can still rejoice, yea, laugh and be heartily pleased at the sins and disobedience of the whole world against God; and who would be sorry if anyone were good at heart and observed God's commandments, and even if able he would be unwilling to help him in the least to this, or prevent the evil and condemnation of his neighbor? What good should we seek or hope for in him who is so wicked as not to desire the salvation of his neighbor? The heathen themselves know of no greater wickedness, or how to paint a more wicked man, than he who is so hateful and envious, as only to delight and rejoice when his neighbor meets adversity. Like some who are so wicked that they willingly suffer harm themselves, if only another thereby suffer greater injury. Such devilish, hellish wickedness cannot be greater in anyone than in such false saints, who alone want all honor before God and the world and wish to be pure and holy, and all others to be obnoxious and filthy.

18. If in bodily ills it be said of a physician who claims to be an honorable and good man, who when he visits a person sick unto death, instead of giving him good advice and helping to restore him to health, does nothing but laugh and make fun of the wretched man; who would not take him for the most desperate villain that walks the earth, in that he not only withdraws his assistance from an unfortunate person in his greatest distress, but even laughs at his sufferings and wreaks out his anger upon him? How much greater villainy is that of a false saint, who sees his neighbor's soul in danger and in the fear of

eternal condemnation, whose duty it would be to risk his body and life to save him; but he refuses not only to do this when he could save him only with one word or a sigh of sympathy, but instead casts it up against him and as much as he is able gladly plunges him still deeper into condemnation.

19. What should such a man do or wish to him who is his enemy, or who has done him some wrong, whom nevertheless he is in duty bound to love and assist as far as he permits him. How would he in this case burst out with anger, curses, blows, so that he would not consider murder as a sin but as holiness, especially in him who would not admit that he was good and holy, like the good brother murderer Cain did with his brother Abel, and his children at all times still do, as Christ himself says of such, John 16:2: *“The hour cometh, that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God.”*

20. Just as little will you find that such a person observes in his heart any other commandment; for just as little would he try to prevent the disgrace of his neighbor’s wife or child, or assist to preserve their honor; yea, when it is lost he would be glad of it and laugh in his sleeves, or had he an opportunity he would do it himself, or even lend a hand. That he avoids such public evil work, is not out of his love to virtue or to obedience to God; for if he does not try to prevent the loss and distress of his neighbor’s soul, how can you expect him to protect his honor or the honor of his family? Much less would he lament or think to prevent harm to his neighbor’s goods, that they be not robbed, stolen, or otherwise destroyed, but would rather rejoice over it and say: It served him right. I will say nothing of his duty to help him in his poverty with his own property, or gratuitously aid him with money. He will neither guard his neighbor’s good name when he hears it slandered and belied, nor try with his own honor to cover and adorn his dishonor; but will rather rejoice and help to belie him and make him out the worst, as such saints especially are accustomed to do, as this one here before God and other people belie this poor publican, whom he in truth cannot accuse of anything.

21. Now see, what a disgraceful, monstrous devil is in such a beautiful saint, who can cover himself with a thin appearance of a few works which he performs before the eyes of the people, and what he does in his worship, thanks and prayers, whereby he blasphemes and dishonors the high majesty with outrage and defiance in the open public, that he dares to boast before God of such scandalous vices, and be so brave as though God were bound to treat him as a model saint, and as a debt and duty give him heaven and everything he might ask. Or if he knew that God would not do it, and accept the poor publican in preference to himself, he would be so enraged with anger and hatred against God, as to publicly take the word out of God’s mouth and say, that he is not God but the

devil from hell, and would gladly if he could, thrust him down from his throne and usurp his seat. And in all this he will not suffer himself to be punished by any one and will claim he did just right; whereas he deserves more than all other blasphemers, that God should at once open the earth and devour him alive.

22. Here you see what a man is and does, who is moved by his own free will or by the power of nature. For this Pharisee is set up by Christ as the highest example of what a man can do by his own strength according to the law. And it is certain that all men are by nature and from Adam no better, and just such vices manifest themselves in them, when before God they want to be holy and better than other people; and that there is nothing but a mischievous contempt for God and all mankind, and are filled with joy and pleasure when men sin against God. Such are twofold: yea, manifold worse than the publican and open sinners like him, because they do not only not keep God's law, but they do not want anyone else to keep it; they do not only not help anyone or do good, but rejoice over their destruction and condemnation; and above all this they adorn themselves and pretend to be exceedingly holy, and with a condemned conscience dare to blaspheme and lie before God's majesty, that they are not like other men, and have kept God's law, so that heaven itself might fall to pieces before them.

23. But now see in contrast this publican, who also comes into the temple to pray, but with quite other thoughts and with a different prayer than those of the Pharisee. For in the first place he has the advantage in that he confesses himself a poor sinner, convinced by his own conscience and condemned, in that he has nothing of which he can boast or be proud before God or the world, but must be ashamed of himself; for the law has so smitten his heart that he feels his misery and distress, and is terrified and filled with anguish at the judgment and wrath of God, and sighs from his heart to be delivered, but finds no comfort anywhere for his evil plight, and can bring nothing before God but mere sin and shame. With this he is so burdened and oppressed that he dare not even lift up his eyes; for he understands and feels that he has deserved nothing else than hell and eternal death, and must condemn himself before God, as he shows and confesses this before God by smiting his breast. In short, there is truly nothing here but sins and condemnation, as much so before God as those of the Pharisee; except that the Pharisee does not confess his filthiness, but will make purity out of it, while the publican so feels his sins that he cannot stand before them, but must confess that he daily offends God with his disgraceful unthankfulness, contempt and disobedience for all his mercies and goodness, and that he has permitted him to live to this hour. Therefore he cannot trust in himself for comfort himself in his own works, but must wholly and entirely despair in himself, if he find not grace and mercy with God.

24. Nor can he despise any one or exalt himself above his fellow; for he feels that he alone is most deeply condemned, and regards all others as happier and better, especially this Pharisee, who in spite of this is full of pollution before God. To sum up all, you see here already the beginning of true repentance in such a person, who is heartily penitent and sorrowful over his sins, and heartily desires deliverance from them, and seeks grace and mercy from God, and besides resolves in his heart to lead a better life.

25. But mark how the publican's word and prayer harmonize when he says: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner!" Where did he learn to speak thus to God, or how dare he conceive, arrange and express such words? For according to reason and human judgment they do not agree, and no man can force such a prayer out of his own heart and thoughts, short as it is. The words of the Pharisee: "God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust," etc., are what a pious man can truly say, and should say. For no one dare be such a liar that his conscience does not accuse him of being a robber, adulterer, etc.; but must say the truth, and not allow the reputation of a good conscience to be taken from him, and he must be a pious man, who says this in truth. On the other hand, a villain can of course also speak these words: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner!" as they are oftener spoken by rogues than by the truly penitent, pious people. Yet, who else would speak them but a sinful and condemned person? Nevertheless the sentence here changes and threatens to become false on both sides, you may turn and shift it as you please.

26. But taken in a fundamental sense it is a speech and example that belongs to the schools and to the theology of Christians, which the world calls heretical. For as I said, no reason can harmonize it, nor can any man, be he as high, wise and learned as he may, harmonize what this publican has here put together, to form and construct a prayer from words entirely opposed to each other: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner?" Yes, surely, this is the art of a great master, which is wholly and entirely foreign, high and far above human understanding.

27. For there never were such words uttered since God in the beginning permitted his voice to be heard, and he spoke unto man. The Scriptures say that in Paradise God said to man, Genesis 2:17: "For in the day thou eatest thereof (of the forbidden fruit, that is, the day in which you sin against my commandment), thou shalt surely die." On Mount Sinai when God gave the law it read as follows, Exodus 20:5: "*I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God, that is, an angry God, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me."* In short that man should know that sin is condemned, and God's wrath and punishment are declared against it. With this it does not at all agree or harmonize that such a sinner and condemned person

dare come before God and pray: “Be thou merciful to me a sinner?” For these two, sin and mercy, are opposed to each other, like fire and water. Mercy does not belong where sin abounds, but wrath and punishment. How then does this man discover the art to unite the two and harmonize them, and how dare he desire and call for grace to cover his sins? To this belongs more than to know the law and ten commandments, which the Pharisee also knew, and it is a different art, of which the Pharisee knew nothing at all, and all men of themselves know nothing.

28. This is preaching the precious Gospel of God’s grace and mercy in Christ, which is published and offered to condemned sinners without any merit of their own. This publican must have heard of this also, and the Holy Spirit must have touched and moved his heart with it, as he feels his sins through the law, that he comes before God and offers this prayer, that he certainly believes and holds as he has heard from the Word of God, that God will forgive sins and be merciful, that is, turn away from them his wrath and eternal death for the sake of his Son, the promised Messiah. Such faith united and bound together in this prayer these two contrary elements.

29. Now, this preaching the Gospel is indeed heard by many, and it appears an easy matter to say this; but it is not as common as men think, that everyone knows it; and no one better understands how difficult it is, than the few who study and exercise themselves in it, that they also might believe and pray like the publican. The reason of this is, because the pious rogue and hypocrite, the Pharisee, is still within us, who hinders and prevents us from thus uniting them.

30. Yea, this must also not be according to our external, worldly nature and its piety, for here we must say and teach nothing else than that grace is not for a sinner, but wrath and punishment, etc. , otherwise no one could live on earth; and God could not defend his majesty, if he would not insist that sin must be punished and good works rewarded; for then everyone would soon say: let us only boldly commit sin, for then we will receive more grace! But here in his spiritual kingdom it is altogether different, so that he who is a rogue receives grace and is declared righteous, and he who is called good is a rogue and is condemned.

31. This takes place here since God’s judgment and the judgment of the world are different, and as far apart as heaven and earth. Before the world it must be thus: If you are good, you shall enjoy it; are you a thief, you are hanged on the gallows; if you commit murder, you are beheaded. Upon this government God himself must insist, otherwise there would be no peace on the earth. But in his own government where he alone is Lord

and Judge without any mediating agents, he is merciful only to poor sinners; for here there is nothing except sin, and before him no one is innocent, as the Scriptures say.

32. Yet it is also true, that sinners are not all alike, so that we must here further distinguish and picture forth those under judgment, and those under grace. For there are some gross and bold sinners, robbers, murderers, thieves, knaves, whoremongers, who act so grossly and are drunk with sin, always rush ahead and never think or ask how they may obtain mercy with God, and go about without any care, as though they were in no danger. To these St. Paul preaches, 1 Corinthians 6:9: “Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” And Christ says, Luke 13:3-5: “I tell you nay; but except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish.” For such are not like this publican, because they are entirely without repentance and live wickedly, and do not yet belong to God’s gracious government, but to the government of this world.

33. Besides there are other rogues who try to imitate this publican, and who use the Lord’s Prayer; they have heard the words that God will be merciful to poor sinners, and have learned to repeat these words and smite their breasts, and can present themselves so humble and penitent in words and questions, that a man could swear, and they themselves would swear, that they are just like this publican, and yet it is all false and a delusion. For they are no better than the Pharisee, and God will be as merciful to them as to him, so that they do not feel his wrath, and he does not strike with his rod among them to punish them, but lets them continue in their wicked state. These are false Christians and disturbers, false brethren, of whom there is also a great multitude in our communion, who can say the words, and can greatly praise the Gospel and God’s grace, and confess they are poor sinners; but when it comes to the test and they are attacked and rebuked, they will neither hear nor suffer it, but begin to be angry and say: their honor is offended and their conscience is troubled, or if they can do no more they will practice all kinds of bad tricks against the Gospel.

34. In words and show these may pretend to be like the publican, but in reality they are like the wicked rogue and hypocrite. For they speak and present themselves thus for the reason alone, that men may be obliged to regard them as pious, and that no one dare call them anything else, until God lays hold of them only a little either by the devil, the world, or by his Word; then they are so tender that they cannot stand anything at all, and cry out against violence and injustice. And in brief, as they were previously poor sinners, they are now perfect saints, and so proud, that no one can get along with their sanctity.

35. Of such the world everywhere is to-day full, especially of the great and powerful noblemen, and the learned sophists. Even the common citizen and the farmer who learned this from our Gospel, that they wish to accept and comfort themselves with the thought that God is merciful to sinners, and yet they refuse to be rebuked and censured as sinners; while they still insist that God's Word cannot remain silent about sin; they apply the Word of God which rebukes sin to others, and say just like this Pharisee: I am not like the rest, and whoever says so is unkind to me. And when one begins to remind them of the wrong they do, they pretend that he speaks against the government, and gives occasion to great dissension. And in brief, one must preach only what they like to hear; if not, it shall no longer be called preaching the Gospel. And such people are like all the false, hypocritical saints, who can indeed say they are poor sinners, but do not want anyone to regard it as true; for when others say it, they are offended.

36. Only these two factions can, and that very easily, harmonize these two utterances; I am a sinner, and, God be merciful unto me. But there is still a third class, who should and gladly would say it in truth, for whom it is the most difficult of all to say these two sentences at the same time from the heart and unite together such a confession and such an absolution. For, they find in themselves two great hindrances. On the one hand there is still too much in us, as I have said, of the old rogue, the Pharisee, that before God we are anxious to be good and righteous, and better than others; this would sooth the heart and be the sweetest joy for him who can bring it to pass. We all would like to have God approve what we have done and be pleased with it; and in words also thank him and confess that this is his divine gift. But there is a hindrance introduced that blocks the way, like the angel with the fiery sword at the entrance of paradise, that no one may come near and boast before God.

37. On the other hand, where the publican must come before God with only sin and shame, stripped of all his praise and full of nothing but corruption, here is anxiety and worry, so that he grasps hold and appropriates the words to himself: "Be thou merciful to me!" But here again both his own modesty and all human wisdom prevents and hinders him still more; yea, the devil himself by the law of God on which he here insists and enforces, as he ought not, to bring mankind into distress and despair.

38. Hence it is indeed an art above all human art, yea, the most wonderful thing on earth, that a man may have the grace truly to know himself as a sinner, and yet again turn round and cast away all thoughts of God's wrath and hold to mere grace. For the heart that truly feels sin, cannot otherwise think or conclude, that God is unmerciful and angry at him. As Judas when he saw that he had betrayed Jesus unto death, immediately began to censure himself, and with heart and reason convicted himself worthy of God's eternal wrath and

condemnation. No human heart is able to escape this, for God's command and law stand in the way, which condemn to death, while the devil drives and chases you to perdition. How is it possible to unite such words of the publican in the face of the law, of your own reason and feelings, which represent nothing else to your heart but wrath and shame. Nor can it enter any heart to confess sin, unless the ten commandments show it what sin is and why it is sin. Hence there are these two parts and they are at the same time opposed to each other; namely, to hear the ten commandments which condemn to death and to hell, and then again to lose them and struggle free from their grasp, and thus ascend from hell to heaven.

39. Therefore let him who can, learn by this high wisdom, and become a scholar of this publican, in order that he too may be able to distinguish these two parts from each other, so that wrath may not abide and cleave to sin, but lay hold of reconciliation and forgiveness; that is, that he judge not of this according to human reason or the law, but grasp by faith the comfort and doctrine of the Gospel of Christ, who alone teaches this wonderful unity, so that man can unite the two opposing words, that are farther apart than heaven and hell. For what else do the words, I am a sinner, mean than that God is my enemy and condemns me, and I have merited nothing but eternal wrath, the curse and condemnation.

40. When therefore you feel that, which you cannot force out of you by smiting on the breast and with your own good works, for it will come of itself if the law really does its work in you, this will indeed teach you how to smite the breast and to humiliate yourself. When you can do nothing else but say: O, I am a sinner! then you are lost, for the ten commandments force and plunge you straight into perdition, that your heart must say: you belong to the devil and God does not want you, and you begin to flee from him, and if you could you would run through a hundred worlds, only to escape. Then it is time in such a flight and terror to stop in your career, turn and say: My precious Gospel teaches me and the good publican, that before God the highest wisdom is to know and believe that God is so minded, and has founded such a kingdom through Christ, that he will be gracious to help poor, condemned sinners. And thus you can unite the two in one word and confession: I am indeed a sinner, but still God is gracious to me; I am God's enemy, but he is now my friend; I should justly be condemned, yet I know that he does not desire to condemn me, but to save me as an heir of heaven. This is his will, which he has had preached to me, and commanded me to believe for the sake of his dear Son, whom he has given for me.

41. See, thus you have in this publican a beautiful example of true Christian repentance and faith, and an excellent masterpiece of high spiritual wisdom or theology, of which the

Pharisee and those like him have never received a taste or smell. Besides you see here the proper fruits that follow faith, that he is now a different man, with a different mind, thoughts, words and works than formerly; he gives honor and praise to God alone for his divine grace; he calls and prays to him from the heart and in true confidence in his Word and promise; otherwise he could not have either thought or prayed these words; and thus he performs unto God the true and acceptable worship, and observes the true Sabbath. And now he also has a heart which is an enemy to sin and disobedience. He does not rejoice but is sorry that he has lived in violation of God's commandments, and now he earnestly and from his whole heart seeks to forsake his evil ways, not to offend, deceive, belie, nor treat anyone unjustly or with violence, and anxiously desires that even thus everyone should live in the same way.

42. This is the picture of to-day's Gospel, of the two kinds of persons among those called God's people. One kind is the great faction of the false church, who nevertheless bear the appearance and the name as though they alone were the most pious and sanctified servants of God; the other, the little flock of those who are true members of the church and true children of God, although they have not praise and great reputation before the world. The difference between them is, that each party is known by its characteristics and fruits, by which the appearance and name should be distinguished from their true nature, of which you have sufficiently heard.

43. Therefore see to it, that you properly follow this publican, and become like him. Namely, in the first place, that you be not a false but a real sinner; not only in words but in reality and from the heart acknowledge yourself worthy before God of his wrath and eternal punishment, and bring before him in truth these words, "me a poor sinner;" but in the same flight lay hold of the other words: "Be thou merciful to me," by which words you take away the point and edge of the law and thus cast and turn from you the judgment and condemnation the law seeks to force upon you.

44. From this distinction in the two kinds of sinners you are able to form a correct estimate of both sides. God is indeed unmerciful and an enemy to sinners, to those who do not want to be sinners, that is, those who do not fear the wrath of God, but who yet continue in their security and do not wish to be punished. Again, God will be merciful to poor sinners, who feel their sins, and confess that they are condemned before the judgment of God. Thus here all is turned about according to the word and judgment of God, just as the persons are; so that the ten commandments gain this interpretation, and they pass sentence upon those who wish to be holy, or do not want to be accused as sinners, and never think that such judgment strikes them. But the Gospel and sentence of grace and comfort pass upon those lying in the terror and fear of death.

45. Again, you must be like the publican in this, that you henceforth forsake sin, for it is not said of him that he continued as he was before, but went forth and applied grace to his own heart, so that God declared him righteous, as the text says: “This man went down to his house justified.” These words do not conclude that he remained in his sin, as he did not go into the temple and pray for that; for whoever desires to continue in sin cannot pray for grace and forgiveness, but he who prays thus thinks, wishes and desires to be just and entirely free from sin. This you must know so that you do not deceive yourself. For there are many who only consider that the publican as a sinner receives grace and forgiveness, and do not think that God requires that they should forsake sin, and let the grace received be henceforth powerful in their lives. But some want to understand it as though God saves sinners in a way that they may still remain in sin and unrighteousness.

46. Hence it is necessary that Christians contend on both sides against the devil and their own flesh. For when they begin to repent and would gladly become different people, then they first feel the devil’s influence, how he excites, hinders and controls them, so that they make no progress, but remain in their old state, etc. Again, if they cannot prevent this, and in spite of the devil turn to God and call upon him, he will attack them with weak courage and cowardice. First, he makes sin so very small, and puts them so far beyond the reach of the eyes and hearts of men, that men may despise them and not desire grace, or they put off repentance. Then on the contrary, he makes sin really too great, as he can blow a fire from a spark greater than heaven and earth, so that it will again be difficult to lay hold of forgiveness, or to bring into his heart the words: “God be thou merciful to me” Thus indeed it is and will continue to be a great art, and we may well take this publican as our example, our teacher and doctor, and learn of him, and call upon God that we may also obtain the end of our faith.

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