

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

The Lord speaks a parable. It speaks it to some who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous, and despised others. That is to say that He spoke the parable to each of us, we who sinfully believe that we are less sinful than others. He speaks the parable so that you can identify with the two men, and compare them to yourself, to learn which of the two you have been.

Two men went up to the Temple to pray. That's a good thing. You've done the same today. Prayer is a confession that there is a God. The one to whom you pray is the one to whom you submit your life and wellbeing. To truly pray is to admit that you are not God, and to seek the help and comfort of one greater than you, stronger than you. One of the men in the Lord's parable did so. Prayer is opening your heart to God. Prayer gives voice to the contents of your heart. Both men in the parable showed what was in their heart.

The two men went to the very place that God had promised to be. They went to the place where the Word of God and the Holy Liturgy was found. They went to the place where sacrifices were offered according to the commandments of God. They went to the place that God called His House of Prayer. The act of going was a confession, a public statement that the God that had promised to be there was the God they worshipped, the God to whom they prayed. Two men went up to the Temple to pray. And both of them prayed honestly.

They went to the same Temple. But that is where the similarity ended. Their prayers were quite different. And that reveals that what they had outwardly confessed by going to the Temple was not the confession of their heart. Consider their prayers. Both men come before God and present of what is theirs, of what fills their heart, to Him.

One man proudly stands. He details what he counts to be his good works, his righteous acts. And in his prayer he aggrandizes himself, while slandering others. He is bold to thank God that he is not like other men, revealing that he holds himself as superior to other men.

He shows no love for neighbor. He makes no attempt to put the best construction on the actions of others. He finds himself to be better, holier, more worthy of God's attention. And in his conceit, in his hubris, he is even bold to articulate the works that he believes make him more worthy than other men before God.

What his prayer revealed were the contents of his heart. And what was in his heart broke the Commandments of the very God to whom he prayed. So in stark contradiction to his prayer thanking God that he was not like other men, he was indeed like every other man – fallen, sinful, prideful, ignorant of the Word of God.

The Pharisee came to the Temple a sinner. He prayed a sinful prayer. He left as he had come - an unforgiven sinner, emboldened in his sin. He had done what the Prophet Daniel warned against, all the while his office was to know and to teach what Daniel said. For speaking by the Spirit of God Daniel prayed "Hear the prayer of Your servant, incline your ear and hear, open Your eyes and see – not because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord hear! O Lord forgive!"

Two men went up to the Temple to pray. The second man prayed differently. He did not bring deeds of righteousness before God. He brought his sins. He brought his uncleanness. He brought his transgressions. He beat his breast, and said “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The tax collector is scandalized by his own sin. He stood afar off, afraid to draw near to the Holy Place because He counted himself unworthy, He is ashamed. He is embarrassed. In his contrition he will not even look up as he prays. He beats his breast, pointing to his heart as the source of his sin. He confesses by his prayer that he stands before God a sinner - unworthy, appealing only to very mercy of God that Daniel proclaimed.

It is in our flesh, the flesh that we receive from Adam, to self-justify, to avoid blame, to deceive even ourselves by pointing to the sins of others. Consider your first father, when caught in sin. His answer to God was “...the woman that you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I ate...” His answer was pharisaical. He blamed God. He blamed the woman.

Consider too the answer of Cain when confronted with the murder of his brother: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He does not admit his sin, but points to weakness in his brother. But to see the sin of Adam, of Eve, and of Cain is easy. Now consider yourself. Consider your own sin. How have you excused your sin, or justified your sin?

Have you considered the most severe sinners and reckoned yourself righteous because you haven’t been that bad, forgetting the sins you do daily commit? Have you tried to dodge the conviction of God’s Law by blaming others for leading you into sin? Have you catalogued the works you have done that you believe to be good, thinking that they more than make up for your shortcomings?

Repent. Do as the tax collector did. Confess your sins. Pray with the Prophet in captivity “we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive!

Such a prayer God has promised to hear. For the tax collector went home justified, declared righteous in God’s sight. And so it is for you. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he should turn from his wicked ways and live. And that life, the life of forgiveness and reconciliation with God, He graciously, He mercifully, He lovingly provides.

Christ, the Exalted One, humbled Himself that prideful and confident egocentric men could be forgiven. He humbled Himself that according to His righteousness God’s anger be turned away. He endured the searing wrath of God in the darkness of Golgotha, that God’s wrath be fully spent on Him, that for those who believe in Him there is no wrath. He was shown no mercy, that you receive God’s mercy, and that God hear your prayer of “O Lord hear!”, “O Lord, forgive!”.

As the Apostle writes, Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. He died for the Pharisee in the Temple. He died for the tax collector. He died for those you count as sinful. He died for you. And then He who humbled Himself was exalted, as He rose from the grave, and ascended into heaven.

In Christ God is merciful to you. In Christ God gives you faith, hope, and strength in the time of temptation. He feeds and empowers you to live in a way that pleases Him. And He bids you come, come to this House of Prayer, His House of Prayer, to hear His Word and to receive His Gifts. He bids you who bask in His baptismal grace, you filled with His Spirit, to draw nigh unto Him, that He may bless you all the more. Here He is merciful to you. And He hears your prayer.

You pray “O Lord, forgive!”, and He places His Body in your mouth, and pours His Blood into you. The forgiveness He won on the cross is applied to you. The faith given you in baptism grows and increases. He causes His face to shine upon this Sanctuary, and upon you who in faith come to receive Him. You come up to this Temple to pray, you confess your sins, you receive God’s forgiveness, you receive Christ, and it is you who go down to your house justified.

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.