

Theme: Ironies of the Passion: “This Man Went Home Justified”

Luke 18:9-14 (EHV)

⁹ Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple courts to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ “However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ “I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

“It’s not my fault!” If you’re a parent you’ve probably heard your children say that. If you’re a teacher, you’ve probably heard a student say that (in fact, I heard one of my students say that just last week). If you’re a supervisor, you’ve probably heard it from an employee. What always follows that statement? That person attempts to *justify* himself or herself. They make an excuse for what they did. They try to shift the blame and get out of whatever consequences might be coming.

It’s kind of ironic that we use the word *justify* for that, because *justify* is one of the most important words in the Bible. It means that God declares us “not guilty,” or “innocent.” But when we use it in everyday speech, it almost always means that we make an excuse.

That difference illustrates the theme of our sermon series for this Lenten season. We’re going to hear about irony—more specifically the ironies that are associated with the Passion, that is the “suffering” and death of Jesus. One dictionary defines *irony* as “a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what might be expected.” Jesus’ passion is, in fact, filled with irony. Tonight, we’re considering a parable Jesus told. What is the irony, the unexpected result, in this parable? It’s found in the last verse of our text: **“This man went home justified” (v. 14).**

Which man was Jesus talking about from his parable when He said, **“*this* man went home justified rather than the other” (v. 14)?** It was the tax collector—the lawbreaker, the very obvious, public “sinner—and not the Pharisee—the one who spent his whole life focused on keeping God’s laws. How ironic!

The original hearers of this parable would no doubt have been surprised when Jesus told them that **“this man,”** this tax collector, this *sinner*, **“went home justified”** and the Pharisee, the man whom the people of Jesus’ day would have looked upon as being “righteous,” was not.

Outwardly, this Pharisee probably appeared to be just that: Righteous. Just listen to him, he’ll tell you. In fact, he tells God how “righteous” he is in his so-called “prayer,” **“The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income’” (v. 11-12).** This man did his best to keep God’s Law, and even went above and beyond what God’s Old Testament Law demanded at times. He was a Pharisee, so that meant he was in the sect of men who defended a strict interpretation of the Old Testament law. They held that it really was the Word of God and that it really was true.

Contrast this Pharisee with the tax collector from Jesus’ parable. Tax collectors worked for the Romans, who had conquered the Jewish nation, and they collected taxes from their own people. The Romans let the tax collectors collect far more than the government required and then keep the difference. Again and again

in the Gospels, we also see them in the company of prostitutes and other known, public “sinners.” No doubt, many tax collectors did indulge in all kinds of sin. So this tax collector would have been seen by Jesus’ original hearers as being very “unrighteous.”

But listen again to Jesus’ words from this parable regarding this particular tax collector: **“However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (v. 13).**

The irony in this parable is that the man who thought of himself as a committed, churchgoing follower of God failed to grasp the meaning of repentance or God’s mercy and grace. But the man who lived a sinful life understood what it meant to repent, and he threw himself on God’s mercy and grace.

Jesus, then, as He usually does in His parables, gives us the main point He was trying to get across at the very end of the parable, **“I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14).**

Now, the *reason* for Jesus parable is usually found at the very beginning of the parable. That is the case with this parable as well. What was the *reason* Jesus told this parable? The first verse of our text tells us, **“Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others” (v. 9).**

Is this us? Are we tempted at times to have a Pharisee-like pride in our religious affiliation, our consistent church attendance—we’re even here on a Wednesday night— or our faithful stance on God’s Word? Do we, whether consciously or subconsciously, think of ourselves as “better Christians” than others—or at the very least, that we’re better than the openly sinful people of the world around us?

If so, we are forgetting God’s grace and mercy and are in need of true humility and repentance. It is only because of God’s grace and mercy in Christ that we are His children by faith. Jesus is the only reason God accepts our efforts. He died and paid for the sin in our hearts that contaminates every effort we ever make to serve God. He died and paid for our sinful pride and self-righteous attitudes. His sufferings and death erase all of God’s record of our sin. His resurrection makes us perfect in God’s sight. Because God sees Jesus when he looks at us, what we do here pleases him. Because we have been declared righteous because of what Jesus did for us—justified, in the Biblical sense—we *want* to serve our Lord with our offerings, our time, and our effort. Knowing God’s mercy in Christ is the key difference that Jesus illustrated with these two sinners who went up to the temple to pray.

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent is a time for repentance—humbly confessing our sins, turning away from those sins, and turning to Jesus for forgiveness. May the Holy Spirit move us to humble repentance, like the tax collector, who **“would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (v. 13).**

Today is also, of course, Valentine’s Day, a day that is meant to focus on love. Speaking of “irony,” our world which is spending so much time, effort, and money on love today, often has no clue what real love is, what it does, or what it looks like. Thankfully, because of God’s grace—His “undeserved love” for us in Jesus, we know. The Bible tells us, **“This is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us so much, we also should love one another” (1 John 4:10-11 EHV).**

And so, you see these two holidays—Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day— which are seemingly so disconnected are, *ironically*, joined hand-in-hand today. In Jesus, today is a day of repentance, sacrifice, and love. Because of Jesus we too, like the tax collector, have a reason to celebrate and rejoice because we too will go home *justified*—declared “not guilty!” Thank you, Jesus! Amen.