

## Christ's Estimate of Sin

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 26, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Zephaniah 3:1-9; Psalm 3; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; *Luke 18:9-14*.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Christ's estimate of sin seems upside down and so unlike ours. Look at these two men in the parable, the pharisee and the tax-collector. Through long Christian tradition we've come to think of the pharisee as the villain; the self-righteous hypocrite who, of all people, doesn't deserve to be forgiven. And we've come to think of the tax-collector as the good guy who, unlike those hypocrites at church, freely admits he's a sinner. If we look at it this way, then we entirely miss the point of what Jesus is saying. What Jesus is saying is this. This Pharisee really was a good man. ~~And the tax-collector really was a scoundrel who emphatically did not~~ deserve forgiveness.

1. Let's take a closer look at the pharisee. *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.* He didn't pray out loud for everybody to hear. He prayed silently within himself. All of us, I'm sure, have shot up silent prayers to God that we wouldn't dare pray in public. We see an old high-school friend who's suffering with alcoholism and we pray within ourselves, "O God, thank you for preserving me from his fate." We don't pray it out loud because we know it would be insensitive. So this good pharisee prayed within himself.

And in that prayer *he thanked God.* He asked nothing from God. So often our prayers are "gimme" prayers. "Gimme this, gimme that". There's so little thanksgiving in our prayers. And when we get what we pray for, so often we forget to thank God. But this good man hadn't come to church in order to get something. He came to thank God.

*The Pharisee thanked God, first, for preserving him from sin. He wasn't an extortioner.* An extortioner is someone who gets money or property from others by force or deception or some other illegal or immoral means. He got his money and property honestly and legally. *He wasn't unjust.* He treated and paid his employees fairly. He spoke up for victims of injustice. Here was a man, I believe, whose conscience would pain him if he had money invested in South Africa because of the unjust way Blacks are treated there. He was concerned for justice. *He wasn't an adulterer.* He was faithful to his wife. He guarded his eyes from looking at other women lest he might lust after them. Certainly in an age of sexual permissiveness there's something admirable about this man's commitment to marital fidelity and sexual purity. *He wasn't like this tax-collector.* I'd like to believe there was a surge of joy in the pharisee's heart when he saw the tax-collector in church. Here was a sinner reaching out to God. When he noticed him he said to God, "There, but for the grace of God, go I. Thank you, God, that I'm not like this tax-collector." He knew that only God had preserved him from sin and he was truly thankful.

*He thanked God, not only for preserving him from sin, but for enabling him to perform his religious duties. He fasted twice a week.* The Old Testament law required only one fast in the whole year, on the Great Day of Atonement. But this man went beyond the God's law. He fasted twice a week. He practiced self-denial. *He gave tithes of all that he got.* He didn't tithe simply on his take-home pay but on his total income. And he tithed, not only his income, but everything he owned. The poor would be better off and the church would lack no money to carry out its mission if there were more people like him today.

He was in dead earnest about his service to God. We can tell whether our heart's in something when it touches our stomach or our pocketbook. For many of us, this is where our Christianity stops. It hasn't affected our lifestyle at all. It entails no sacrifice. Fasting, as a religious discipline, sounds fanatical. And the idea of tithing sounds absolutely foolish. But not this pharisee. He fasted and sacrificed and lowered his standard of living for God. There were poor people in Jerusalem who ate because he fasted and tithed. The work of God's kingdom was strengthened by his sacrifice.

*He wasn't a hypocrite.* He didn't profess one thing and then do another. Some pharisees were like that, but Jesus gives no indication that this one was. *Nor is his prayer necessarily self-righteous.* It's no mark of humility pretending that we're worse than we are. *He was a good man,* the best Judaism had to offer. *Don't look down on this Pharisee and thank God that we're not like him.* He wasn't a villain but rather represents complete dedication to observing the Law of Moses. Would that all of us emulated this man's life-style of total devotion to God that expressed itself not only in prayer and worship but in living justly and providing, through his tithes and offerings, for the poor and unfortunate.

2. *Now, let's look at the tax-collector.* The typical tax-collector worked for the Roman government whose military forces occupied Palestine in the days of Jesus. During WWII we'd have compared him to a Nazi collaborator. He was a traitor to his country. He was an extortioner, blackmailing and cheating his own people out of land and money. This disgusting behavior constituted the worst imaginable life-style. He very probably had all the sins from which the pharisee

thanked God that he'd kept himself. We shouldn't idealize this tax-collector. He wasn't the generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the good-hearted hooker, who people now-a-days so often admire for their honest flaunting of their sins and rejection of organized religion. He was a real scoundrel.

3. Yet it was the scoundrel and not the good man that went home justified.

What did the good man lack? *He'd missed what was at the center of God's revelation by Moses, the knowledge of sin.* He'd attended public worship; he'd seen the continual offerings for sin; perhaps he knew in a way that we're all sinners. But he'd missed the whole teaching of the Old Testament which fixed a person's eyes and their faith on the coming Redeemer; and, having missed it, he returned home from his worship, unjustified. He thanked God for the good that was in him. And he thanked God for protecting him from sin. But he wasn't able to see the good that was *not* in him, *nor the sins which he had, which were hidden.* Anybody who looks downward and measures oneself by the weaknesses and sins of a neighbor immediately becomes proud.

The publican, on the other hand, *knew* he was a sinner. He didn't look at the pharisee at all. He doesn't say, "I thank you, God, that I'm not as proud as this pharisee; I'm an extortioner, unjust, and an adulterer. I'm human. That's the way humans are and I admit it. I'm an honest man. I don't kid myself, I don't have any illusions about myself. I'm honest enough to admit that I'm a sinner and not hide the fact like that hypocritical, self-righteous, do-gooder, pharisee." No, *the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'* When we really

turn to God with a burdened conscience we don't think of other people at all. We're utterly alone with God. We have enough to think about without thinking about others. .

The tax-collector's prayer is a cry of despair. He strikes his chest in despair entirely forgetting that he's in a public place. He's overwhelmed by the bitter sense of his distance from God. He and his family are in a hopeless situation. If he repents he knows he'll have to quit his job and change his sinful way of life. He knows he'll have to make restitution of his ill-gotten gains and pay a penalty to the people he's defrauded. He knows he'll never find a job that pays as well. And who'll want to hire an ex-tax-collector?

The point of what Jesus was saying is this. God freely justifies sinners when they sincerely confess their sin. This is what the Reformation was all about. This is Reformation Sunday when we, as a Reformed church remind ourselves of this great truth which Luther rediscovered. God freely justifies sinners. God does *not* justify good people. Good people don't need to be justified. Good people don't need Christ. Good people may thank God for their goodness, but they don't need to ask God for anything.

William Barclay, the Scottish New Testament scholar and writer of so many popular Bible commentaries once shared how he had made a journey by train to England. As he passed through the Yorkshire moors he saw a little whitewashed cottage and it seemed to him to shine with almost radiant whiteness. A few days later he made the return journey back to Scotland. The snow had fallen and was lying deep all around. He came again to the little white cottage, but this time its whiteness seemed drab and soiled and almost grey in comparison with the virgin whiteness of the

driven snow. It all depends what we compare ourselves with. And when we set our lives beside the life of Jesus and beside the holiness of God, all that is left to say is, "God be merciful to me, the sinner."

I wonder what the tax-collector was thinking when he went home. Did he say to himself, "Now I can go on as before now that I've found out that God justifies sinners who confess their sin. I can go on extorting and committing adultery and treating people unjustly,"? Or would he not rather have gone away filled with gratitude for God's immeasurable goodness and found it simply impossible to give further pain to his Father in heaven and disappoint him? Would he not go home singing,

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Let us pray: Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment... Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a joyful spirit... Amen.