

SERMON NOTES

Fifth Sunday of Hisnag
(Fifth Sunday of Advent)

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 18:9-14

WHO IS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD?

INTRODUCTION

In some years, this is our last lesson, before the New Year, from Luke's account of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. From this journey account, our Advent Synaxis Gospel readings have highlighted a few of the many teachings with which Jesus prepared His disciples for their future ministry to the world. However, as our Savior approached Jerusalem and His death on the Cross for which He was born, He had compassion even for those who constantly opposed him, the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were outwardly very religious and had contempt for all who did not belong to their group, especially for such low life as the tax-collectors, some of whom were attracted to Jesus. Jesus told the following parable to warn these self-righteous men.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 18:9-14

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer.

"The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

"But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who

exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

NOTES

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

Although "certain ones" does not name the Pharisees, they had been asking Jesus questions earlier. They are still viewed as part of the audience. Possibly Luke uses the term "certain ones" so that all Pharisees might *not* be included in the following indictment. However, other non-Pharisees who were like the Pharisee of the parable would be included in "certain ones."

These people were self-confident that God would agree with them that they were righteous—that there were no sins between them and God. They felt that they needed no help to be righteous. One must obey all the laws of God to be righteous and they considered themselves to have accomplished this feat.

They looked down their noses at other people who did not discipline themselves as they had done. From what we have learned from an earlier lesson, it probably inwardly pleased them to see others fail in areas in which they themselves had succeeded.

Jesus once noted that all the laws of God could be summarized thus: To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with your entire mind, with all your soul and with all your strength AND to love your neighbor as yourself. The self-righteous Pharisee fell far short of the second important part of the law.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer.

All Jewish men (but not Jewish women or Gentiles) were allowed into the court of Israel. It bordered on the court of the priests (where the sacrifices were offered), separated from it by a balustrade. This is probably where the two men went to pray.

A Pharisee may be defined thus: a member of a highly respected party in Judaism which arose between 134 and 104 BC. "They were rigid legalistic separatists, with watchwords of prayer, repentance, and charitable giving."¹ They emphasized the keeping of the Mosaic Law as well as many other laws which they wrote themselves.

Most of the Pharisees opposed Jesus, at first, because they viewed Him as a Sabbath breaker. Later, it became apparent that Jesus' message of grace and forgiveness was far different from their cold application of the Law. Jesus also exposed their empty, self-serving, and hypocritical lifestyles. For this, they hated Him.

A tax-gatherer was sometimes called a publican. Under the Roman domination of the Jews, taxes were collected for Rome by a certain class of Romans. They often subcontracted their duties to native people in the provinces. The system was open to a great deal of abuse.

The Jewish men who were subcontracted to collect taxes for the Romans were often extortionists, and were despised and hated by their fellow countrymen. Because they worked on the Sabbath and had close contact with Gentiles, they were considered unclean and were classed with abject sinners, like prostitutes.

¹ Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 359.

The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself,

The normal position of prayer was standing. He probably took up his position in a prominent place, near the balustrade.

“To himself” may be better translated as “concerning himself.”

‘God, I thank Thee, that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer.

If Luke had not warned us about “those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt,” the reader might have thought this Pharisee was truly thankful for any benefits he may have enjoyed.

Notice that only outward sins are in the Pharisee’s list.

In this sentence we see those for whom he had contempt: others, or the rest of the people.

The tax collector was one of the “others.” He was lumped in with swindlers, the unjust and adulterers, the lowest of the low.

I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

This man began to brag to God about his good deeds. He did do outwardly more than was required. In fact in his eyes, he was at the very top of the heap; he looked down on everyone else.

Fasting was required only on the Day of Atonement, once a year. Other fasts might be called for special emergencies. Fasting twice a week would be a very strict self imposition. It would be taken as a sign of devotion. Later, some Christians adopted this practice.

Tithes were a tenth part of produce, from the land and animal husbandry, paid to God. “If a Hebrew preferred to dedicate the tenth of his cereal and fruit yields in the form of their monetary value, he was free to do so, but a fifth of that sum had to be added to it. He was not allowed to redeem the tenth of his flocks and herds in this way (Lv. 27:31, 33).”²

“To these comparatively simple laws in the Pentateuch [first five books of the Old Testament] governing tithing, there were added a host of minutiae which turned a beautiful religious principle into a grievous burden.”³ The Scribes and Pharisees were responsible for these extensions to the Mosaic Law.

This Pharisee tithed absolutely everything, no matter how he acquired it, not just on those things specified by the law.

But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying,

Jesus contrasted the self-righteous Pharisee with the other man who had come to pray. “Standing far off,” the tax collector stood at the very back of the court. This was a sign of his sense of extreme unworthiness.

In deep humility, he kept his eyes cast down, rather than lifting them up to Heaven.

“Beating his breast,” was a sign of deep remorse.

² J. D. Douglas, F. F. Bruce, J. I. Packer, et al, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1962), p. 1205.

³ *Ibid.*

‘God, be merciful to me the sinner!’

Be merciful is a translation of ἰλάσθητι⁴ a form of the verb which means to propitiate, conciliate. In the Temple ritual system before the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the Ark were the stone tablets of the Law. The penalties of the Law had to be applied to the sinner. However, if the Mercy Seat that covered the Ark were smeared with the blood of a sacrifice, God accepted the death of the sacrifice (a type of Christ) instead of the sinner. Thus the blood came between God and the Law. This acceptance is called propitiation. This was the tax-collector’s prayer—that God would be toward him as He is when He views the blood sprinkled Mercy Seat.⁵

This is a bit different from the verb ἐλεέω, which is also translated *have mercy*, but means *to help out of pity*. The tax-collector is not asking for pity, but for forgiveness. God had provided a means of forgiveness for sins. Ultimately, that means of forgiveness would be Christ’s atoning or propitiatory death on the Cross for all mankind’s sins, including this tax-collector’s sins. At that point in time, the animal sacrifices of the Temple system pictured that ultimate sacrifice to come. God was able to forgive, before the Cross, because He knew what He would do on the Cross in the future. He applied the benefits of the Cross, forgiveness and reconciliation to Himself, to all who repented from Adam to our own day.

In the modern Armenian Bible, at this verse we read that the tax-collector asked “Asdvadz voghorme,” but in the ancient Armenian Bible we read “Asdvadz kavya,” “God [may my sins] be expiated” or “God [may my sins] be atoned,” which is the same meaning as “be propitiated.” This old Armenian word exactly translates what the original Greek text means.

“The sinner” is the way the tax-collector referred to himself before God. He confessed that he was a sinner with all that both he, and God, knew that meant in his case. He knew himself to be at the very bottom of the heap.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other;

“Went down” is always the way one described leaving the Temple mount. One went up to the Temple and one went down from the Temple, even though there were higher points in the city.

To be justified, δεδικαιομένως⁶ has the nuance *to be declared righteous*. This is a legal act, as in a courtroom.

The sinner, the tax collector, was declared righteous (by God, the Judge). The Pharisee, the man who trusted in himself that he was righteous, was not declared righteous.

for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he that humbles himself will be exalted.”

“Exalts himself” (literally, the one lifting himself, ο υψων εαυτόν)⁷ means that he lifts himself up, or raises himself up high.

⁴ The form of this verb is an aorist imperative.

⁵ Unger, p. 415.

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature [BAG]* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p 197.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 850

God will “humble,” ταπεινωθήσεται, is a figurative use of the idea of leveling (as a hill or mountain). Figuratively it means to humiliate by assigning to a low(er) place or exposing to shame.⁸

Those, like the Pharisee who lift themselves up high, priding themselves on their own accomplishments, God will humiliate and expose to shame. But those like the tax-collector, who knew he was an abject sinner before God, and appealed in deep remorse to God for forgiveness, God will lift up high. He will forgive the man and cleanse him from all his unrighteousness. God will then declare the man righteous.

APPLICATION

Perhaps some of us in our Church may identify with either the Pharisee of Jesus’ parable, or with the tax-collector. These two are really extremes and are meant to be so. We all fall somewhere between these two men.

The Pharisee has a lot that we can admire. He is very religious; he believes he is careful to obey all the laws of God, even more than what is required. He is proud of his accomplishments and loves for everyone to know the great things that he does.

If he were an Armenian, he would always be at every Badarak, and he would always be on time. He would fast every Lent and observe all our other fasting days as well, not just giving up ‘something’ but actually going without food for the fasts other than Lent. For Lent he would forego any animal products whatsoever.

He would not simply pay his Church membership dues and make a contribution here and there on special occasions; this Armenian would join the pledge program and pledge as much as possible. He would be so careful about financial matters that the Church would, no doubt, ask him to be on the Parish Council, and probably to be the Treasurer. If he were one of our wealthy members, he would donate the money for the new Church Hall and his name would be on it.

We would all know that he does all this and we would all think of him as a super Christian. However, if our Armenian is really like the Pharisee, he will also think of himself as a super Christian, and feel that God is really pleased with him, not like those other people in the Church who don’t half try!

No, our super Christian is not like those Armenians who are like the tax-collector of Jesus’ Parable. Everybody knows they cheat in business, even other Armenians. They associate with other undesirables, because decent people don’t want to have anything to do with them. They hardly ever come to Church, not even to just stand around outside and smoke until it’s time to take communion. Our super Christian really can’t stand those people and he is so thankful to God that he is not like them. And when he prays, he reminds God of how much he has accomplished.

The fact of the matter is, however, that in God’s sight, we are all sinners, even our super Christian. A parish priest used to praise his congregation for all the good things that they

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 804

had done. Every Sunday he would do this, and every Sunday he would end his sermon by saying, “But it’s not enough!” He meant that what the congregation had done was not enough to be sure of God’s acceptance, of God’s salvation. And he was absolutely right. All the good things that the Pharisee and our super Christian does are not enough to win God’s acceptance.

On our own, none of us can live up to God’s requirements. On our own, we sin in some way every day of our lives. The Pharisee of the parable and our super Christian, who is like him, may look good to the rest of us, but they have sins that God sees. The Pharisee’s sin was pride and a lack of compassion for the weak. Our sins bar us from God’s acceptance. Good deeds will never be enough to pay for our sins.

The penalty for sinning is not to do good deeds. The penalty for sinning is death. Though He loves us, God is a just God. Justice demands that the penalty be paid. We would all be without hope if God had not made a way for us to escape the penalty for our sins.

At this Advent season, we celebrate God’s birth 2000 years ago as a human being to make a way for our escape from the awful penalty of eternal death. By becoming a man God was able to pay the death penalty for us all, every last one of us, from the worst of us to the best of us. On the Cross, He paid the penalty once and for all time. Now with His justice propitiated, God is free to offer us His forgiveness.

But who will God forgive? We have learned from Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector that a person trusting in his own good deeds to win God’s acceptance will not be forgiven. That person, like the Pharisee, is offering the wrong payment to God. In contrast, we need to trust, not in ourselves, but in what God has already done. We need to trust in God’s finished work on the Cross, where Christ took our place in death. When we do this, and turn in remorse from our sins, humbly, with a broken and contrite heart, asking for forgiveness, He will forgive us.

The tax-collector was forgiven. The tax-collector was also justified. He was declared to be righteous by God Himself. How could the sinful tax-collector now be righteous? The writer of the first epistle of John tells us, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”⁹ The person God has cleansed from unrighteousness is now righteous. God declares it to be so. God has done what we could never do; He makes us acceptable to Him.

At this glorious time of the year, we remember once again God’s most wonderful gift to us, the gift of salvation in the form of a tiny baby whose destiny was the Cross. Let us fall on our knees and humbly thank Him that He has been propitiated, that our sin penalty has been paid. Let us thank him with all our heart that He forgives us when we truly repent, and He cleanses us, and declares us righteous, acceptable to Him. What a wonderful God and Savior. What joy to the world! What indescribable peace!

⁹ 1 John 1:9