

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Last week, Jesus told us a parable concerning prayer, and Luke told us that He did it in order that we not lose heart in our prayers, but that we would be persistent in them. And you recall that Jesus concluded that parable with the ominous question: “*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” (Luke 18:8).

This week, Jesus tells us another parable of two men praying, and Luke again tells us why. Jesus had to address another problem — this time it was not about losing heart; this time it was faithless hearts, the corrupt and callous hearts of those “*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*”

The parable Jesus tells is of two men praying at the temple. God’s house is a house of prayer as the prophet Isaiah says and as Jesus quoted (Isa. 56:7; Luke 19:46). The faithful went to the temple not only to have the priests offer up their animal sacrifices but also to pray together, the priest going before the altar of incense to let the prayers of the people “*be counted as incense before*” the Lord (Ps. 141:2). The faithful still come today to God’s house for prayer. Certainly personal prayers are important, but corporate prayer is even more so. God doesn’t just command our prayer; He commands our gathering together (Ex. 20:8-11; Heb. 10:24-25). It is unfaithful for someone to say, “Oh, I’m a Christian; I pray all the time,” while despising God’s house, His word, and His sacramental gifts.

The first man we encounter in Jesus’ parable is a Pharisee. Now, most of us, I think, have been trained up to dislike the Pharisees. But I think if we were around then, we would have liked them, wanted to get to know them, aspired to be like them. By all outward appearances, they were the pillars, the ones with power and money, the philanthropists, the pious, who tried, by all accounts, to live righteous lives.

To be sure, not all Pharisees were like this one Jesus tells us about in the Gospel, but Jesus gives us a glimpse of the heart of those “*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*” Look at his “prayer.” Oh yes, he said, “*God, I thank you,*” but for what? For God’s goodness and grace? For God’s wondrous deeds? For God’s glory and mighty power? No! Rather his prayer was, “Look at me. Look at my goodness. Look at all my works.” “I do this, and I do that, and I’m better than they are” — “I, I, I,” he said over and over. This Pharisee came to the temple comparing himself with the others gathered there to pray, finding himself to be superior, standing off by himself so that he would not have to be sullied by any of those who were unclean.

Now don’t misunderstand. I’m certainly not suggesting that seeking to live righteously is bad. It’s not. God desires it; He commands it. Don’t steal; don’t

cheat; don't commit adultery. All this is good. Fast if you desire it. Remember Luther says, "fasting and bodily preparation are certainly a fine outward training" (Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, "Who receives this sacrament worthily?"). Give your tenth, and more. That's good, too. St. Paul encourages us to be generous in every way, and he reminds us, "*God loves a cheerful giver!*" (2 Cor. 9:7).

The problem is when we rely on these things for our righteousness, or when we think that because of these things we deserve something from God, or when we start to think of ourselves as "holier than thou." Luther reminds us "we are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them," "for, [no matter how good we may think we're doing, the fact is that] all of us daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment" (SC, Lord's Prayer, Fifth Petition).

What is the basis, then, of our prayers? It can't be ourselves, as the Psalmist asks, "*what is man that you are mindful of him?*" (Ps. 8:4) No the answer is grace. The answer is in Him whom God made to be "*a little lower than the angels,*" yet crowned "*with glory and honor*" (Ps. 8:5). The answer is in Him who humbled Himself by becoming a servant like unto us and humbled Himself even unto the death of a cross (Phil. 2:7-8). The answer is in Him whom God highly exalted and gave "*dominion over the works of [his] hands*" and "*put all things under his feet*" (Ps. 8:6). Yes, when we pray, we pray through Him — Jesus Christ, our Lord — "*that [God] would give them all to us by grace*" (SC, LP, Fifth Petition) because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. His all-availing sacrifice made peace with God. Through Him do we have access to the Father (Rom. 4:24–5:2).

Which brings us to the second man in Jesus' parable. He too was in the temple praying, but oh, how his ways differed from the Pharisee's. He stood far off; his head was bowed down; his eyes, filled with shame, would not look to heaven; his chest received the blows of his own fist. He came not interested in making comparison with others, but confessing his sins; he stood far off not because he considered himself better than others, but because he knew he was unworthy, a wretched sinner. His prayer was short, simple, and heartfelt. It was a prayer of faith: "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"

But there is something hidden in that little prayer: "*be merciful.*" He uses not the usual word for mercy, which we heard this morning: *Kyrie eleison* —Lord, have mercy. *Christe eleison* — Christ have mercy. This tax collector says not *eleison*, but *hilastheti moi* — propitiate me; don't be angry with me, God, but by the blood of these lambs offered up to You, which point us to the spilt blood of the Lamb of God, atone for my sins, forgive me, and receive me.

And we can have no doubt that God heard his prayer. Jesus said, “*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other*” — not the Pharisee but the tax collector went home justified, forgiven, righteous before God. The tax collector’s prayer was a prayer of faith, a faith that made him righteous; his prayer was heard and answered: “yes, you are justified.” For the teacher says, “*he hears the prayer of the righteous*” (Prov. 15:29), and Paul says, this was the reason Jesus came: “*to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15), to justify us by His blood, received by faith (Rom. 3:25).

Jesus told this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in response to the question He Himself posed: “*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” Will He find it among us? How can we be sure?

We start by coming to the temple, to Jesus Himself. Come to the place where the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29) is held before our eyes. Come here not comparing yourself to others or exalting yourself before God, but acknowledging your own wretched state, confessing your sins, and humbling yourself before God in repentance. Come here crying out to God for His forgiving grace; come here in faith, trusting that because of Jesus’ cross, by His blood spilt, your sins are forgiven; you are cleansed from your sins. Come here to eat the body and drink the blood of the immolated Son of God; eat it believing the words “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” and have “what they say: ‘forgiveness of sins.’” Come here, not only confessing about yourself and hearing the Gospel of forgiveness, but also thanking and praising the God who gives you such grace, who justifies you, and who will at length exalt you. Make His altar the center of your life in Christ, trusting that He will preserve your going out and your coming in both now and forevermore. “This is most certainly true.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.