

The Ironies of the Passion, Ash Wednesday

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:*¹⁰ *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”*¹¹ *The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.’*¹² *I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’*

¹³ *“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”*

¹⁴ *“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* (Luke 18:9-14 NIV 1984)

This Man Went Home Justified

“It’s not my fault!” Does that sound familiar? If you’re a teacher, you’ve probably heard a student say that. 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. And what does that mean? 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 in his courtroom. But when we use it in everyday speech, it almost always means that we make an excuse. That subtle difference illustrates the theme of our Lenten devotions. This year, we’re going to hear about irony. One dictionary defines irony as “a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what ... might be expected ...” Jesus’ passion is filled with irony. Tonight, we’re considering a parable Jesus told. What is the irony, the unexpected result? **This man went home justified.**

I.

Now, maybe this parable doesn’t seem all that ironic to us. But the gospel promises a result that is the opposite of what anyone would have the right to expect. Jesus wanted his hearers to be surprised when he told them that **this man went home justified, not the man who tried to follow God’s laws.**

Jesus told this parable to people who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. Two men went up to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee prayed, **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”** We cringe at that prayer, right? But how did the audience Jesus was speaking to react? They thought they were righteous, so Jesus didn’t tell a story that would sound ridiculous to them. He didn’t want them to simply dismiss his comments as a caricature of the people he was talking to. So how did this man sound to them?

One of the ironies of this parable is how we react to the word “Pharisee.” To us, that word means proud and self-righteous. We can’t imagine a Pharisee as anything other than a hypocrite. The gospels back up that assessment. But to the first century Jew, Pharisee meant something else. St. Paul was raised a Pharisee and he was proud of that label before he came to faith. The Pharisees were the people who stood up for a strict interpretation of the Old Testament law. They held that it really was the Word of God and that it really was true, unlike the Sadducees who were more like the theological liberals of the modern Christian Church.

So when this man said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer, that was true. He didn’t sleep around. He didn’t break into people’s houses or shoplift. He had never committed any crime that could get him thrown in jail. To put it in modern terms, he didn’t even have a traffic ticket. And to any first century Jewish observer, there was a clear difference between him and the tax collector. Tax collectors were collaborators. They worked for the Romans, who had conquered the Jewish nation and they collected taxes from their own people. The Romans let them collect far more than the government required and keep the difference. Again and again in the gospels, we see them in the company of prostitutes and sinners. You’re known by the company you keep. Even more important, you’re influenced by the company you keep. Without a doubt, many tax collectors plunged into all kinds of sin. Not only did this Pharisee avoid all that, he gave ten percent of his income to the Lord, just like the Old Testament commanded. He fasted twice a week. God only

commanded one fast per year in the law of Moses. So, it's pretty easy to see why this man would be pleased with the kind of man he was – and that Jesus' listeners would identify with him.

So what was the problem? The pride of his heart. One of the great ironies of Scripture is that we can do the right thing for the wrong reason and still be guilty of sin. This man was confident of his own righteousness. He thought he was earning points with God by what he was doing. He thought that he was coming out ahead in God's record book. Why wasn't he? Because he ignored all that God says in the Old Testament about needing a new heart, about approaching God with humility, about being sinners who are saved by God's mercy.

Another great irony of Scripture is that people who think that they can keep God's laws always have to rewrite those laws. They always cut off the parts they can't keep – like having a pure heart and a humble spirit, like avoiding lust and greed and coveting – and they add things they can do, like fasting twice a week. Then they tell themselves that they are doing God's will. It simply is not true. This man was not justified. In God's court, he was still guilty.

My friends, could we ever be confident of our own righteousness? Could we ever echo this man's prayer? "I thank you, God, that we in the WELS are not like other churches. We practice the doctrine of church fellowship and we avoid praying with people not of our fellowship. We maintain purity of doctrine and practice and discipline those who refuse to conform to your word. We're not like the Catholic or the Methodist or the Episcopalian church down the street." Or maybe we could make it a little more personal: "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other people in this pornographic and materialistic society. I avoid internet sites that no one should look at. I don't beat my wife or children. I don't use drugs. I stay out of trouble. And look at all I do for my congregation – I've been president of the council or the ladies guild. I give ten percent of my income to the church. I never miss a Lenten service and I always help prepare the meals."

Could we offer that prayer? If we did, what would be wrong with it? Doesn't God command us to observe the fellowship principle and to avoid praying with people who don't share our confession? Doesn't God command us to keep his doctrine pure and to stand on the truth? He most certainly does. And he expects us to follow that command. I'm not in any way saying that those things are unimportant. Likewise, he does expect us to avoid internet sites that lead us to lust. He does expect us to love our spouses and children. He does call us to support the work of the church with our offerings and our time and our talents.

So what is the problem? The same problem this Pharisee had: pride. If we're doing all that because we think we're righteous before God, if we break our arms patting ourselves on the back for all we do, if we ignore the areas of our heart and our lives where we sin and tell ourselves that we we're better Christians than all those others, then we have done nothing that God considers righteous. We are sinners, born and bred. Sin corrupts even our best efforts and makes them filthy rags in God's sight.

The only reason God accepts our efforts is Jesus. He died and he paid for the sin in our hearts that contaminates every effort we ever make to serve God. He died and paid for the pride and sin that cuts off those parts of God's law that we cannot do and adds things God never commanded. His sufferings and death erase all of God's record of our sin. And 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 – justified to use the biblical term – we want to serve our Lord with our offerings and our time and our effort. Because of Jesus and his mercy, we do all those hard things, like refusing to pray with people who don't share our confession, or avoiding temptation in our entertainment choices. 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.

II.

The irony in this parable is that the man who thought of himself as a committed, church-going follower of God failed to grasp the meaning of repentance for a new life. But the man who lived a sinful life understood what it means to repent and he threw himself on God's mercy. **This man went home justified. The man who humbled himself before God.**

The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He prayed simply, **"God have mercy on me, a sinner."** He understood that he could make no defense in God's courtroom. In our society, even the most obviously guilty criminals have a right to a defense in court. They can hire a lawyer. They can try to convince the jury that they really didn't do whatever they're accused of. They can sing and dance and argue and sometimes it even works. But in God's courtroom, there are no lawyers' games. There are

no technicalities. There are no miscarriages of justice. God has all the evidence before him because he knows all that we have done and said and even all that we have thought and felt.

This tax collector didn't lie to himself about his righteousness. He understood that the only verdict God's court could possibly render was guilty. So he threw himself on God's mercy. What is mercy? It's the desire to help someone who's in trouble. It's what we feel when we see news reports about cities destroyed by hurricanes and send money to buy blankets and medicine. God has mercy on sinners. He knows that we deserve to die and go to hell. But he loves us and he wants us to reach heaven. So he sent his Son to live and die and rise again to wipe away all record of our sin.

In his mercy, he comes to us and tells us that good news. He touches our broken hearts and gives us faith and hope to stand before him and confess our sin and plead for forgiveness. In its simplest form, repentance is longing for God's mercy. It begins with humility – with brutal honesty about our own guilt and our inability to earn forgiveness. Then, repentance clings to Christ in faith. We ask for mercy for this day's sins because we know it's coming. Then, God justifies us personally. He doesn't make excuses for our sins. He doesn't say, "Well, they didn't know any better. They live in a society that's growing more and more antichristian every day. I'm just glad they're trying hard." God does something better. He comes to us in the gospel and he declares us not guilty. He reminds us that he washed our sins away in baptism. He gives us personally the life and death and resurrection of Jesus so we know that in his courtroom, the finding in our file is not guilty.

No one who clings to Jesus can say, "I thank you, God, that I'm not like other men." True faith is humble: "I thank you, God, that you don't give me what I deserve. I thank you, God, that you have had mercy on me. No one knows better than you how guilty I really am. But you declared me not guilty. You gave me love and forgiveness. For that I thank you, Lord."

Irony is written all over the gospel. We will explore it more this year during Lent. But Jesus himself illustrated that irony when he spoke this parable. God cares about your heart. God cares about your faith. No matter how sinful you have been, you will live with him in heaven. Trust him. Admit your guilt to him and cling to his mercy in Christ. Go home today justified, declared not guilty. Amen.