

Pentecost 22 Oct 2010 Luke 18:9-17

“Mercy is Your Only Hope”

Play the melodrama game: Pretend you are good highly respected church going people hearing Jesus tell you about two fellows who went to the temple to pray. When you hear some behavior **you agree with** say, “**Amen!**” When you hear behavior **you don’t agree with** say, “**Boo!**”

I’m hoping that by playing the role of Jesus’ audience, you will have a better feeling for the way Jesus’ audience must have felt as he told them this parable. Remember the first verse of the texts says, *9He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:*

A highly respected religious and community leader begins praying in the temple:

I thank you that I am not like Bernie Madoff who cheated people out of their life savings. AMEN!

I thank you that I am not unjust like O.J. Simpson, or Lindsey Lohan! AMEN!

I thank you that I am not an adulterer like Tiger Woods! AMEN!

And I surely thank you that I am not like the mayor of Bell and his cronies! AMEN!

I give up chocolate, and starbucks every Lent. AMEN!

I give ten percent of my income to the church. AMEN!

Now, into the temple walks Ted Bundy, the convicted pornography addict, rapist, torturer and murderer of young women: (Do you agree with that behavior? – **Boo!** With tears running down his cheeks, and his head down, he says, “God, be merciful to me a sinner. - - (Do you agree with **that** behavior? IF IT IS SINCERE???) –

Then Jesus speaks:

“I tell you a guy like Ted Bundy who admitted he deserved the death sentence he was given, and asked Jesus’ mercy, went down to his home **justified**, rather than the respected religious and community leader. (What is your response to Jesus’ words? – Well, if **Jesus** said it, it must be right, -- so amen.

So **why** is it right? What did Jesus say to explain why the cheating tax collector type was justified, and the upstanding respected leader was not?

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

You can understand Jesus’ explanation in a right way or in a wrong way. When I listened to my pastor tell this story as a 10 or 11 year old. I thought I understood it in the right way, but I didn’t. Here are the two ways:

1) If you want to please Jesus, don’t brag to him about all the good things you do, just be sure to say, “Lord have mercy on me a sinner.”

2) If you want to please Jesus, you can tell him all the good things you do, but His teachings will ask you, “Do you think the One who is Holy, Holy, Holy, the one who is perfect will be impressed by your puny good deeds?”

Down through history people have answered Jesus' teaching by saying, "Well my goodness isn't much, but it is the best I can do to help you pronounce me justified, and forgiven. That is what the Roman Catholic church still teaches. You are justified by faith in what Jesus has done, **and** by your additional acts of love. That is what famous Pastor, Rick Warren of the huge Saddleback Community church teaches. I've heard him teach that God wants **more than faith** in Jesus. He wants people to serve him. He will ask people on judgment day what have **you** done for Jesus."

Most Baptists, Pentecostals, and Non-denominationalists say that we Lutherans teach cheap grace when we say we are justified by grace (gift) through faith, for Christ's sake. They say, "Lutherans will just accept forgiveness for free, and won't try to serve Christ!" I say, "When you know you're a damned sinner, with no chance of justifying yourself with God, and you receive the Good News that God's Holy Son paid for your release with his own life and he loves you right now as bad as you are – you are not going to let yourself miss an opportunity to serve him with deep thankfulness!"

Jesus' point is **not** that we should try not to brag but to be humble, but rather that we have **nothing** to brag about before Jesus. We **cannot** earn his judgment of "not guilty, therefore justified!"

If we are honest with ourselves and Jesus, all we can do is admit that even what we consider good, is never purely good. And when we begin adding up our good works in order **to help Jesus get us justified**, or forgiven by God, what we really are doing is treating Jesus sacrifice on the cross as if it **wasn't quite enough**. When we add up our goodness, we are guilty of subtracting Christ's holiness. We are subtracting his mercy. We exalt ourselves and humiliate Jesus.

All we can do is realize we cannot help justify ourselves in anyway. We can only add on more weight of sin and self-condemnation.

However, Jesus bore the unbearable weight of all sin for all sinners. Jesus **alone** satisfied God on the cross! Because of Jesus we who have nothing to brag about and like the tax collector can only kneel before Jesus and ask for his mercy. No matter how big our sin, it is not too big to hold back His merciful forgiveness and love!

So let's do one more AMEN to Jesus' mercy for unworthy sinners like us: AMEN!

When Jesus' teaching, like this one about the two who went to the Temple to pray, convinces us that we are helpless sinners unable to even help a little bit in getting into God's favor, and into heaven, **only then** can Jesus exalt us to His family. When we are convinced of our helplessness and of Jesus' gift of favor and forgiveness forever, then we gratefully receive membership in the family or kingdom of God just like an infant child does in Holy Baptism.

Jesus was exalting **all** children even you and me when He said, "Let the **children** come to me, and do not hinder them, for to **such** belongs the kingdom of God."

Let's PROCLAIM one final AMEN to Jesus' exalting of all children who have been given faith in His gift of mercyAMEN!