

## 30 October 2022; Romans 3 / Luke 18; Reformation Sunday; Pastor Fraser Pearce

Today, for Reformation Day, let's start with a quote

From the Augsburg Confession.

This is what we, as Christians in the Lutheran tradition,

Confess together about Justification,

About how we are declared innocent in God's court:

***Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake or sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St Paul says in Romans 3 and 4.***

This is compact teaching, but note some of the key points:

The imagery at work with 'justification' is the courtroom,

And whether the verdict we face will be not guilty or guilty:

Righteous or condemned.

Our confession of faith is that

There's nothing that *we* can bring into *God's* courtroom

That will give us a not guilty verdict.

God's grace toward us, his free favour to us,

Is shown in the sacrificial suffering and death of Jesus for us.

In Christ we have the great 'not guilty' verdict of God to us,

And as we trust in this verdict, we receive the gift of life from God

That worldly death cannot destroy.

Now this teaching is also given in the Romans reading we have today,

Listen to what St Paul says: **For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now *justified* by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *sacrifice of atonement* by his blood, effective through faith.**

All human beings are in the same boat:

We fall short of the glory of God, and cannot do anything

To justify ourselves: to render ourselves not guilty in God's court.

We are declared innocent, we are justified,

By God's gracious gift, the sacrifice of atonement by Jesus' blood.

As we trust that this sacrifice is for us,

Then we live in this new reality, this declaration of innocence,

That is God's free gift to us.

Compact theological teaching can be difficult to grasp,

But, as it happens, Jesus himself gave us this same teaching  
In the form of a story, a parable.

It's the parable that we heard last week:

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

So today let's listen again to the story that Jesus told us,

And let his Spirit-filled word bring and keep us

In the life of faith, so that we may live as people

Declared innocent by God, who can live with hope

That shows itself in the life of Christian love.

Just before we get into the story from Luke 18

I want to draw your attention to the context of the parable.

Jesus has just told his disciples

The Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Widow,

A parable that ends with Jesus asking these words: **And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?**

In prayer, Jesus is saying, the problem is not that God does not listen

Or that he is slow to act.

Rather, the problem is that we so easily give up trusting God:

We so easily fail to show faith.

Jesus then gives a parable to show us *what faithful prayer looks like*,

And we will learn that at the heart of faithful prayer,

Is God's gracious provision for us

Of the sacrifice that cleanses us from sin,

And that makes us righteous, just, and innocent before God.

Listen to how the parable begins: [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

We know that Jesus has been talking to his disciples,

And now he is talking to an attitude, to a mindset.

It's a parable for us when we think we can be confident

In our own righteousness, in our own ability to be declared innocent

In the courtroom of God.

It's also a parable for us when we think

That we can gauge our righteousness

By comparing ourselves favourably with others.

Here's what Jesus says, **'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.'**

The location is the temple.

What was unique about the temple, especially as a place of prayer?

Prayer, after all, could happen anywhere:

We know that Jesus himself prayed in many different locations.

The temple was unique as a place of prayer

Because it was the place of sacrifice,

The place where sin was atoned for

Through the blood of sacrificial victims.

The two characters who go to pray are a Pharisee,

Someone who is determined to live according to God's commands,

And a tax collector:

Someone collaborating with the Roman imperial power,

And making a personal profit from it to boot.

Here's how the parable goes on: **The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."**

Note first of all the language of this prayer to God:

It's a thanksgiving prayer:

The Pharisee is acknowledging that the good he has,

Including the good things that he does,

Comes as a gift from God.

That sounds good, doesn't it?

He thanks God that he is not like other people who are sinners,

And the sins he mentions are real sins.

Now he does indeed lack self-awareness here,

But I think we are meant to understand that he is praying sincerely,

That he would be shocked if God told him

That he is making a mistake in comparing himself favourably

Compared to the Tax Collector.

What's more, I think we are meant to understand that he really does

The things that he says he does:

That he is not a hypocrite in the modern sense of the word.

So what's the problem?

Well, remember the location: the temple: the place of sacrifice.

Is the Pharisee asking for help from God?

Does he pray as if he needs a sacrifice to atone for his sins?

He does not. There is no faith that justifies at work here.

It's like going to a doctor to say how well we are,

As we compare ourselves favourably to the other patients.

We don't understand who a doctor is, and why the doctor's door is open.

And we miss out on the healing that is at hand.

Listen now to how the story, the parable, goes on: **But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”**

Think first of all about the body language here: It is a picture of humility.

Think also of the attitude of the Tax Collector:

He does not compare himself favourably or unfavourably

With other people, but with God,

And because he knows that he is in the place of sacrifice,

The place where blood is shed to atone for sins,

He asks God to provide the sacrifice for his sins.

He says, **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”**

This is not the normal word for mercy,

Like we have with ‘Kyrie, eleison’.

Rather, it’s word that is related to the one that St Paul uses

In today’s reading from Romans, where he says

That God put forward Jesus **as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood.**

The tax collector does not put his trust in himself:

He does not compare himself to others,

He comes into the presence of God

And asks God to provide the sacrifice that will atone for his sin.

And Jesus says: **I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.**

The tax collector was declared innocent by God,

And went from God’s presence in a right relationship with his creator.

As Christian people we know that Jesus, when he told this parable,

Was not only teaching us spiritual truths,

He was teaching us about himself,

He was revealing who he is: the one who is the atoning sacrifice.

He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

So, do not be afraid, but come to God’s presence today in trust.

Here you have the body and blood of the sacrificial victim,

Given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins.

In him you have what you could not provide for yourself,

The declaration of innocence, and the freedom to love others,

Rather than compare yourself with them.

So let us in faith humble ourselves today before God,

And let him lift us up by his grace in Christ Jesus,

And live as people justified, declared innocent by God’s grace,

For the sake of Jesus our Lord. Amen.