

Sermon: 11th Sunday after Trinity

Text: Luke 18:9-17 (v.1) – The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Theme: What do you think about yourself?

Goal: To guide the hearers to a true humbleness and repentance, trusting only in God's mercy in Christ.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Telling parables is a unique style of Jesus' preaching. Sometimes He just told some parables. Other times He gave the reason why He was telling that specific parable. This is the case of the parable of today: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The story is well-known and is addressed to those who are confident of their own righteousness and look down to everybody else, despising them. Can you see yourself in this picture? Or not... The parable is about pride, and about God's mercy to the humbled and repented sinner.

I – Looking up to down

The Pharisees were a specific class among the Jews, so to say the élite, the top of the church. They tried to do their best according to the Laws of the Jewish church, and they considered themselves righteous. Because of obeying the Law to the smallest details, they considered themselves holy and clean, while the ordinary people were unclean and secondary.

The prayer the Pharisee of this parable offered shows what they thought about themselves and about others: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

Not to be a “robber, evildoer, adulterer” is a virtue, and we have to fight against these sins and temptations. The problem is when we compare ourselves with others, thinking that we are better than the others just because we don’t commit some sins. This attitude shows that we are not honest with ourselves and we are not honest with God either, hiding some sins as they were not important, and highlighting the sins of others. This is falsehood and pride, which are sins as well. Sin is sin, and condemns; if they are notorious sins that everyone can see, like those mentioned by the Pharisee; or if they are inner and secret sins, known only by ourselves and by God, from whom we cannot hide anything.

If we acknowledge this, we have to confess that we are all sinners and we fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). There is no difference between *big sins* and *little sins*. All condemn.

This is one of the goal why Jesus told this parable: To let us know that we all are sinners and that we cannot be proud of our deeds and of our obedience, as if we could earn God’s favor through them.

The term ‘Pharisee’ became a synonym to a hypocrite person, a false person, someone who shows himself righteous before others; but when he has the opportunity to take some advantage or to do something wrong, he will do it.

When we make the distinctions, which would suggest that God loves some more than others, we are trusting that we have qualified for the “beloved” category. This is just spiritual pride. We love to deflect attention away from this by putting a label on the other person which allows us to deny our problems and say that I have not descended to that level of depravity. (Phil Brandt, p.26)

And this is not just a personal issue that tempts us. It's also a collective issue as we together form a church. A commentary wrote: *"The Church might look upon itself and realize that it has often been a lousy ambassador of God's reconciliation. We have been a country club church, excluding far more than we have embraced with the forgiving love of Christ"* (Phil Brandt, p.34). due to some of our attitude of judgment over others, looking down to some sinners who are searching for help and despising them.

II – Looking down to up

It is interesting to note that immediately after this parable we have the account of Jesus and the babies who were brought to him. The original term in Greek says *a child who cannot yet speak*, little infants. They are just the opposite of the Pharisees: They are not proud, but they are totally dependent.

The concept of what a child is in our culture is totally different from the concept of the people in Jesus' time. We think that children are cute, innocent, and we have to agree that they are taking over the authority of their parents. Just observe when a child interrupts the talk of adults: usually we stop speaking to give attention to the child. *In the eyes of folks in the ancient world, children were weak and helpless, without the ability to solve their own problems, feed themselves, hold a job, or own property.* (Phil Brandt, p. 29). This is the image Jesus had in mind when He says: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus says we must be like children, helpless, dependent, without the ability to solve our own problems and hanging on the good care

of another. (Phil Brandt, p. 29). As children look up to their parents, we also shall look up to the only one who can help us: Our heavenly Father.

This was the attitude of the Tax Collector while praying in the temple. “He would not even look up to heaven, but he said in humbleness: God, be mercy on me, a sinner.”

When we come to God’s temple, to God’s house, we cannot come with our hearts full of pride for what we did or accomplished during the week. We can, of course, give thanks for the numerous opportunities we had to help others through our work and deeds. But before God we have to come with humbleness and repented, saying as we usually say: *Lord, have mercy on us, Christ, have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us.*

Conclusion: Self-trust and self-confidence are fashionable words. You must know what you want and you must be sure what you are doing. This can be true in our business, when we need to take decisions and our employees are waiting for our command.

But when we approach God, and in our relationship with our fellows, God shows us another attitude: humbleness and trust in God’s love. We are not worthy of what God offers us in His Gospel and in the Holy Communion. This is pure grace by faith in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for us. Like little and helpless children, we approach the throne of grace repented and in confidence in God’s promises that He accepts the sinner – as He accepted the Tax Collector, who went home justified before God and in peace; while the Pharisee, who trusted in his own deeds, went back home the same as he came to the temple, or even worst: full of pride, but without God’s grace. And let us share this gift of God with others, not despising them, but loving them as God loves and accepts us.

Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 27 August 2017 (Adapted)