

1 Trinity 11 – Luke 18

What kind of people do you like better? Those who always thank you for things or those who always ask you for things? The one who thanks you for things probably isn't as much of a burden. He seems to recognize the effort and thought you put into what you do. Meanwhile, the one who always asks you for stuff is always depending on you. You see his number come up on your phone or you see him walking to your door, and you might groan a little, wondering what he wants this time.

Two people went to worship God. One gave thanks and the other asked for things. Which one do you think was accepted by God? One spent the entire time thanking God. He was cheerful, not afraid to express how he felt, committed to giving more and more to God. The other one stood far away. He wouldn't even look up at God while he asked him for help. Jesus tells us that the one who asked was declared righteous by God, and the one who spent his time giving thanks was not.

Now, the point of this parable is not that we shouldn't thank God. The point is that the Pharisee's show of thanksgiving wasn't true thanksgiving at all. He wasn't thankful. To be thankful toward God is to speak of what God has done. Consider how our worship service is arranged. Before we take part in the Lord's Supper we follow our Lord's example by giving thanks. I say, "Let us give thanks unto the Lord our God." You respond, "It is meet and right so to do." Then the prayer of thanksgiving goes on to thank God. But what does this thanksgiving sound like? After saying, "It is truly meet, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you," the prayer goes on to describe what God has done. During this season we recall Christ's resurrection on Sunday morning. So on Sunday morning we pray, "Who on this day overcame death and the grave and by His glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life."

Consider another part of our worship service. In the greater Gloria we sing the song of the angels, reminded of our Savior's birth, which revealed God's heavenly glory to bring peace toward sinners. And then the song goes on to praise and thank God. But again, what does this praise and thanksgiving sound like? It recounts who God is and what he has done. We sing of Christ's incarnation, his atoning death, and his ascension to the right hand of the Father. And in the midst of our praise and thanksgiving, we beg him to have mercy on us and to receive our prayer. Thanksgiving gives God the glory by actually talking about what God has done and continues to do through his Son and his Holy Spirit.

On the outside, there is no reason to deny that the Pharisee's expression of thanksgiving and praise was sincere. He expressed what he felt. He certainly felt thankful, thankful that he was not like other men, thankful that he was not a cheat, an adulterer, a thief, or a tax collector. He was happy. Knowing that he had developed good habits of piety gave him joy. But feeling thankful isn't necessarily true thankfulness. Sincere expressions of worship aren't necessarily true and sincere worship. If you are truly thankful toward God, then this means that you acknowledge what God has done. You can tell God again and again that he is worthy to be praised, but if what God has done is not clearly known or confessed, then your praise and thanksgiving will end up being all about you and your own expressions of some kind of personal religious fervor.

It's good to be thankful that God has kept you from terrible sins, such as adultery and theft. But how does God do this? He sent his Son into the flesh to bear our sins. He gives us his Holy Spirit through his Word, and he strengthens us against temptation through this same gospel. If we forget this, then our praise of God turns into praise for ourselves.

This is why Jesus gives the example of the tax collector as the true model for worship and thanksgiving. True thanksgiving flows out of a broken and contrite heart and faith trusting in the mercy of God. Look at what the tax collector is doing.

First, he is standing afar off. He's ashamed of himself. He has learned the law of God from the teachers at the temple. And this law has taught him that he stands guilty before God. He has learned that he should love God with his whole heart. He should love his neighbor as himself. He has been drawn by the law to see that he shouldn't lust after money while neglecting to pray and acknowledge God. He has been taught by the law that he shouldn't cheat or sell out his neighbor. He has come to realize how guilty he is. So he stands far away, like a little child afraid to come into the living room to speak to his angry parents.

Second, he is not even looking up to heaven. He knows that God is the Lord of heaven. Heaven is his throne and earth is his foot stool. He has learned from Psalm 143 that no one living is righteous in the presence of God. And he has learned from Moses that no one can see God and live. Like a child who looks away when he approaches his father, he doesn't dare even to look up to the throne of God.

Third, he beats his chest. Here, he is acknowledging that he is flesh and blood. He is the creature, and God is the Creator. God has made him, giving him everything he has in both body and soul, yet this man finds nothing good within himself.

These three signs are described by Jesus in his parable in order to teach us what contrition is. Contrition means that you are sorry for your sins. You don't make excuses. You're ashamed. Your sins bother you, because you know that they offend the living and holy God of heaven. You plead guilty. You claim nothing good in yourself.

But then Jesus describes the tax collector's brief prayer. First, he asks for mercy. He asks for forgiveness. Literally, he asks God to provide atonement for his sins. O God, be propitiated toward me, he says. In other words, let your anger be turned away from me. Here, he is expressing another doctrine he has learned from the prophets. In the temple, he also learned from the signs of the sacrifices. He could smell the stench of the blood. He could hear the slaughter of the animals. These were signs of the sacrifice God promised to provide. As Psalm 65 says, "Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You will provide atonement for them."

Here is the object of his faith, expressed in this very brief prayer. He doesn't rely on many words, like the pagans who think they will be heard because of how much they are saying. In this little phrase, have mercy, forgive me, let your anger be turned away from me, he is confessing the very heart of what he was taught in the house of God. It is that LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy. It is that God was visiting his people to

redeem them. This is the object of our faith. It is the very content of our worship, and it is the ground of our thanksgiving and praise.

The tax collector also calls himself a sinner. He calls himself the sinner. While the Pharisee compares himself to the tax collector, the tax collector compares himself to God. God is the righteous one, and the tax collector is the sinner. Here is a true confession. And this is at the heart of our worship and thanksgiving. It is to recount how God is righteous and how we are sinful. It is to hear from God what he freely gives and receive it with the empty hand of faith.

This worship of the tax collector followed him back to his house. I tell you, Jesus says, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. He went to the house of God not with his own righteousness. Instead, he claimed God's righteousness, God's mercy, God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake. He brought it home with him. Did he feel good like the Pharisee felt? It seems not. But the comfort the gospel gives is hidden in the grief of an afflicted and humbled spirit. Did he feel as thankful as the Pharisee? It doesn't appear so. But his confidence in God's mercy far exceeds any pious feelings we can muster up by our own efforts.

Before telling this parable, Jesus was lamenting about whether the Son of Man would find faith on the earth when he returns. He was telling a parable of a woman who kept asking for justice from an unjust judge. The unjust judge didn't want to help her, but because he was annoyed and overcome by her continual begging, he finally relented and gave her what she asked. To the world, those who worship God with a broken and contrite spirit seem like annoyingly needy people. But Jesus paints these pictures for us to illustrate faith. Will he find such faith when he returns? Will he find the broken heart, which clings only to what God has promised in his Son?

This true worship of faith is impossible for man. It can't come about by our own methods and pious measures, no matter how sincere we imagine them to be. All our attempts to create an authentic worship environment only end up exalting ourselves and avoiding any humiliation. And those who won't be humbled in this life will most certainly be humbled by God's final judgment. But when the Word of God faces you in sincerity and truth, revealing the darkness of your natural heart's desires, and lays before you the only hope of mercy and salvation in God's Son, then the Holy Spirit is creating and sustaining faith. Despite how the world despises and is even annoyed by this faith, God counts it as righteousness. He will not let his saints' tears go unnoticed. He will not turn away from their cries. When they ask him for what only he can give, he will grant it. He will exalt them at the proper time, filling their hearts with eternal praise and thanksgiving before his heavenly throne. Let us pray:

My sins, O Lord, against me rise.
I mourn them with contrition.
Grant through Thy death and sacrifice
To me a full remission.
Lord, show before the Father's throne
That Thou didst for my sins atone.
So shall I from my load be freed.
Thy Word I plead.
Keep me, O Lord, each hour of need. Amen.