

“But the tax collector, standing a distance away, wouldn’t even look up to heaven but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, forgive me, a sinner!’” – Luke 18:13

Jesus sets this tax collector up as our example of one who goes home justified. He is declared free from sin and righteous in God’s sight. Jesus proves this by pointing to the man’s humility. He who humbles himself will be honored. This is therefore the model for all Christian worship and the entire Christian life. It is the sign that someone has been declared righteous by God.

But what is this humility? Contrary to what some might say, humility is not a lack of boldness and certainty. If I preach to you a sermon explaining what Scripture says about sin, God’s wrath against sin, God’s grace in Jesus Christ who saved us from our sins, died for us, rose from the dead, and gives us his Holy Spirit and eternal life, then I should be bold and confident in what I am saying. Why? Precisely because I am not proclaiming my own words. These are the words of God. If I were to end my sermon by saying, “But then again, I could be wrong. Who knows? God help us! Amen,” then that might sound to some like I am being humble. But in reality, I would be very arrogant to say such a thing. Humility is not just some show we put on. Nor is it some passive aggressive tactic to soften the blows of what you say. Humility is to be reduced to nothing before God, to despair of our own words and works, and to let God’s Word stand alone. It is to recognize that God alone is true, that he alone is right, and that there is nothing we can do to add or take away from his faithfulness.

God doesn’t justify us because of our humility, as if humility is some great virtue we have achieved. Humility has no strength in itself. It can only draw strength from God’s truth. If we act as if we can impress God with how humble we are, then we will only end up exalting ourselves before him. St. Paul calls it a show of humility, which in reality only serves the full enjoyment of the flesh (Col 2:23).

This is exactly the kind of faux humility we see in the Pharisee. He thanks God for not being like other men. This may sound humble at first. After all, he is thanking God, seemingly giving God the credit for him not being like the sinners of this world. He then goes on to describe these evil people from whom God has spared him. He lists robbers. There is hardly anything more arrogant and lacking in humility to take what doesn’t belong to you, as if you are entitled to something just because you want it. He lists wrongdoers, or extortionists, who bend the rules to scam their neighbors out of money. This again is a terrible act of pride, as if you have the right to harm someone just because you have figured out how to play the system and make it work in your favor. Then he lists adulterers. This sin is certainly driven by pride and arrogance. A man sleeps with a married woman who is not his wife, because he has convinced himself that he is better than her husband. Couples who sneak around think they know better than their parents. All of these wicked acts described by the Pharisee are certainly filled with pride, arrogance, and not a shred of humility. If God has kept you from these things, then you should thank him.

The Pharisee then turns his attention to the tax collector who is in the temple with him. He thanks God that he is not like this tax collector. Tax collectors, of course, were notorious for overcharging and collecting more money than they needed to, only to fill their own pockets. This, like the other sins, certainly would have carried with it that same kind of pride and arrogance, leads you to cheat your own family members. The tax collectors were traitors to their people, using the authority of the occupying Roman government to take the hard-earned money of their own flesh and blood. They were as depraved as the other kinds of public sinners, except they were protected by the power of the sword.

The Pharisee goes on to describe the things he does, which make him look humble. He fasts twice a week. Have you ever gone without food, deprived of the nurture your body craves? It's meant to teach you that your true nutrition comes from God's gracious Word. He gives a tenth of everything he owns. Giving a tenth of your basic income is difficult enough for most people. But this guy gives a tenth of everything he has. When you give the first of your possessions to the service of God and his Word, then this should humble you to learn that God provides all you need to support your body and life. We sing, "We give Thee but Thine own, whate'er the gift may be. All that we have is Thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from Thee." But the Pharisee does not fast and tithe before God. In reality, he isn't giving God any credit for anything. Instead, his worship is directed toward himself and that tax collector. His fasting and tithing are only a show of humility, used as leverage against other people who have messed up their lives.

The Pharisee thanks God that he isn't like any of these people. He thanks God that he isn't like this tax collector. He then boasts about the things he does. It is abundantly clear that he is not driven by humility. Instead, he is filled with arrogance, pride, and self-exalting conceit. He exploits the sins of others only to honor himself, but those who honor themselves will be humbled.

Yet, at the heart of the Pharisee's pride and utter lack of humility was not only his pompous show of bragging about himself and putting down his neighbor. It wasn't just that he was so cocksure of himself. These, to be sure, demonstrate his hubris and pride. But underneath all of this hypocritical act of worship and fake show of humility was his utter lack of confidence in God's mercy. He doesn't speak of what God has done, and he doesn't ask God to do anything. He doesn't hold onto any of God's promises. As self-secure as this Pharisee presents himself to be, he is in fact severely and miserably insecure. He has no ground to stand on. Here he is in the temple, where the sacrifices are made, where blood is poured out for sinners to draw attention to God's gracious favor and forgiveness. Here he is in the temple where God promises to dwell with his people, provide atonement for their sins, and be their shelter forever. Here he is in the temple where God's Word is proclaimed and the promise of salvation is sung from the Psalms. And yet, he has no confidence in any of this. He doesn't even mention it. His worship does not in any way rest on these works and promises of God.

Instead, his worship is dependent upon that tax collector standing behind him. The tax collector becomes his sacrificial lamb, his scapegoat, to make himself feel righteous in comparison. He draws his confidence and boldness not from the gracious promise of God, but from the miserable, shameful state of someone else. Despite his confident sounding words, he is unable to face God with an honest and humble heart. He has no boldness to expose his sins before God, because he has no faith in the sacrifice that God provides. He's truly an insecure man, utterly lacking in the certainty of God's salvation.

But what about that tax collector? Jesus points out his humility. What was humble about him? Just count the ways! In that short description, Jesus gives us plenty to observe about the man. He stood a distance away, showing that he didn't take the best and most honorable spot. He demonstrated an awareness of his great shame and unworthiness to stand before the righteous Lord. He wouldn't even lift his eyes up to heaven, recognizing that no man can see God and live. He was beating his chest, which is a sign of contrition. Contrition is sorrow over sin. This isn't just being sorry because you got caught or sorry because you have to face the consequences. No, this is a heart that is broken over

knowing that you have offended God. The tax collector is not just saying humble things or making humble expressions. Much more, he has been humbled. He has been brought to nothing.

This is because, despite the fact that he cannot lift his eyes to heaven, he is most certainly facing God. He sees the sacrifice. He smells the blood, a stench that continually reminds him that the wages of sin is death. He doesn't talk about anyone else. He doesn't speak of anything he has done for God. He can barely express any words at all. This is a picture of humility, one who has been humbled under the mighty hand of God. As David sings in Psalm 32, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity."

Yet, at the heart of the tax collector's humility wasn't how unassuming he was, how far away he stood, how he bowed his head and beat his chest. More than this, it was that he acknowledged himself to be a sinner. In fact, he called himself the sinner, as if to say, "I stand before God, the sinner before the righteous one." He doesn't dwell on anyone else's sin but his own. And yet, even this was not at the heart of the man's humility. At the heart of the tax collector's humility was his sure boldness and confidence to ask God for mercy.

Such boldness is was not mustered up in him by his own preparations and pious exercises. No, his boldness came from what God promised. He stakes his entire life on God's pledge to forgive. All his confidence is in the atonement that God provides. He came to the temple to hear God's Word and receive what God swore to give. He saw the sacrifices, which were shadows of the sacrifice of Christ who gave himself up for our sins. He heard the words of the Psalms and the prophets, which pointed toward this atoning blood and righteousness of Christ. So while he finds no confidence in himself, completely brought to nothing in the face of God's holiness and his own sin, the man is given boldness and confidence and certainty, which this world can never know by its own pompous and proud works.

This is at the heart of true humility. It's faith in the promise of God who does not count your sins against you. It's the sure hope that God will exalt you. Such faith is more certain than anything known to man, because it rests in the certain promise of God in Christ. And yet, this bold faith only lives and grows in those who have been humbled. God looks to the broken and contrite spirit, and he gives his own Holy Spirit. He gives his comfort to the afflicted heart. He gives light to those who find no light in themselves. In other words, he exalts the humble. He lifts up the one who has been brought to nothing. He gives confidence to the one who has no confidence in himself.

Did that tax collector feel justified when he went home? Who knows exactly how he felt? What matters is what Jesus says. "I tell you, this man went home justified." "I tell you," Jesus says. When you receive the word of the gospel, Jesus himself is speaking. He is declaring you righteous. He is declaring what your own reason and strength can't grasp. Even when the sins you just placed before the altar of God continue to haunt you at home, what does Jesus say? Draw your strength and boldness from his words. When he gives you his word of absolution, he is declaring you righteous. When he gives you his body and blood, he is declaring you righteous. Those who don't kneel before his words will not be exalted. But you can be sure that when he leaves you with his peace, gained by the spilling of his own blood, all knees must bend before him. There is forgiveness, life, and salvation in no one else. Therefore he alone is to be feared. This is humbling to your flesh, which naturally tries to find confidence in all other things. But don't be ashamed of your humility. God does not despise it. He will exalt you and honor you at his appointed time. In Jesus' name; Amen.