

It's easy to write people off for their sinful behavior. Write them off as a lost cause. A foolish girl just keeps falling into toxic and destructive relationships. An addict falls again into his destructive habits. A husband keeps snapping at his wife, a wife keeps disrespecting her husband, and their children never learn to behave. Will such people ever learn? Will they ever shape up and control themselves? When we rely on our righteousness, then this deep cynicism sets into our hearts. They'll never change. They'll always be unruly, selfish, perverted, and irresponsible. The old sinful nature in all of us is judgmental, never wanting to look into the mirror of God's law and repent of the sins that dwell within. Instead, the sinful heart looks with contempt at others who seem to be worse off. This is the cynical nature of unbelief. It exalts itself while tearing others down.

But our Lord is not cynical. He is the only one who is righteous, the only one who can truly stand before the throne of God's perfection. He knows the deep depravity of man's heart. He knows that we are incapable of changing ourselves. He knows that, if left to our own devices, we would never shape up or pull ourselves out of the misery of our own sin. Yet, he does not remain cynical. He doesn't write us off as a lost cause.

This isn't because he believes we have some sort of potential. No, he clearly teaches that for man it is impossible. Instead, he remains faithful to what his Father sent him to do. He came to fulfill a righteousness that no man could possibly fulfill. He did so with confidence in what his Father gave him to do. For the joy that was set before him, he endured the suffering and death of the cross, counting the shame to be very little in comparison to the salvation he won for all sinners.

Jesus therefore didn't write off the sinners. He didn't look at us and say, "They'll never change, so what's the use?" Instead, obedient to his Father's plan, he became a man, put himself under the law, and offered himself before the Father on the altar of the cross, turning God's wrath away from miserable sinners. He who alone has the right to God's favor has now bestowed this favor on those who were utterly lost.

This is no fickle, skeptical, or conditional favor. It's the favor the Father has always had for his Son. To us, it is pure grace and mercy. It declares us righteous through faith. It is the good news of peace and goodwill toward all people. It is the gospel of salvation, redemption, and a new life under Christ for all who believe. This gospel doesn't write sinners off as a lost cause. It saves sinners. It declares the ungodly righteous. It causes them to stand before God with confidence in a righteousness outside of themselves. For this reason, the gospel also produces fruit. It changes the heart and causes us to boast in God's grace even in the midst of afflictions and temptations. By this good news, our Lord exalts those who have been humbled, even as he increases hope in our hearts. In this way, the gospel puts to shame all cynical and hopeless judgments of sinners.

Jesus told a parable to those who trusted in their own righteousness and looked with contempt on others. Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee had his life together. By all appearances, there was nothing about him that needed to change. He didn't jip people out of their money or charge more than what was fair. He didn't participate in fornication or other perverted act, which destroy home and cause societies to crumble. What he did was good for the culture, not only in the home and society, but even for the religious community. He went to the temple, fasted and prayed more than he was expected, and gave a tenth of everything had. He even thanked God for all of this.

But all that Pharisee's righteousness was based on this one comfort: he isn't like other men. He isn't like that tax collector. In other words, his righteousness is not by faith. Instead, he trusts in himself. By trusting in himself, he is cynical about his neighbor. He sees the tax collector as a lost cause, in other words. After all, the tax collector has done great damage. He has extorted his own people while collecting money from the occupying Roman government. The Pharisee therefore writes him off, just as he does to other sinners. He doesn't believe that the gospel can change the heart of his misled brother. He therefore obviously doesn't need the gospel for himself either. In his contempt for the tax collector, he blinds himself of his own need for God's gift of righteousness in Christ.

The Pharisee was the righteous one. The tax collector was the sinner. The Pharisee had his "T"s crossed and his "I"s dotted. The tax collector had burned too many bridges. Even if he had money, he had no respect from any decent person. How could he change? For man it was impossible.

But righteousness and redemption don't come about only after we first change ourselves. No, it comes from God turning his fatherly heart to us. God cannot change. In him there is no shifting shadow. In him there is only light. He doesn't have mood swings, happy one day and angry another. He is always good and just. The Father is always loving the Son, and it was by that same love that he created man, both male and female, giving them life by his own Spirit.

This love of God has never changed. But our sin is completely opposed to God's love. This is why God is angry with sin. His wrath against sin is the other side of his love. In fact, if he were not angry with sin, then he would not be eternal love. God can't change. And yet, in the great mystery of his unchanging love, he became flesh in the person of his Son. In a way that is impossible for human reason to comprehend, his Son's perfect obedience turned God's wrath away. This great mystery is called propitiation. It is that he became propitious toward sinners, favorable toward sinners, forgiving and gracious and merciful toward sinners.

How? By the same love he has had from eternity. By his unchanging love, he has turned his wrath away through the atoning sacrifice of his Son. As St. John says (1 John 4:10), "This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

This propitiation or atonement was promised by God through his holy prophets. He taught the people of Israel to look forward to this atonement when he brought them out of Egypt. He gave them an order of worship with sacrifices in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Here there was the holy place and the inner room known as the most holy place. In the most holy place was the Ark of the Covenant. On top of the Ark of the Covenant was the Atonement covering, also known as the Mercy seat. Once a year the high priest would go into the most holy place to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on top of the Atonement covering in order to make atonement for the people. This is God's mercy. It is that by the blood of the covenant his wrath would be turned away from sinners. This has never changed. It has been God's plan from before the foundations of the world.

So two men went up to the temple to pray. One was the righteous Pharisee. The other was the sinful tax collector. The righteous Pharisee relied on his own righteousness. The tax collector looked to God's mercy toward him. He couldn't even lift his head up to heaven. He could only beat his breast as he observed the sacrifice on the altar. He had nothing to claim from himself. He pleaded only for what God promised to provide. He cried out, "God forgive men! God be merciful to me! God be propitiated to me! Make atonement for me! I am the sinner. Turn your anger away from me and comfort me!"

The tax collector looked to what neither he nor the Pharisee could see with their own eyes. Hidden behind the curtain in the inner room was where God had placed his Mercy seat. By faith, not in himself or in his own righteousness, he pleaded for the mercy and forgiveness only God could give.

That was therefore his righteousness. It was in the atonement, which God himself provided in his Son, the atonement foreshadowed by gallons of blood from goats and bulls. This atonement is nothing other than the blood of God in the flesh, poured out for us, which covers our sins forever. This is your righteousness. It is how you stand before God, not resting on your own hopeless attempts to look good, but on the peace that surpasses all understanding. This righteousness of Christ changes everything. If it has turned God's wrath away, then certainly it casts out all evil wrath and malice in us as well.

The cynicism of the Pharisee is rooted in self-righteousness. When we lose all hope for our brother who is caught up in sin, it's because we don't believe that God is able to bring him to repentance. This is because we are relying on our own righteousness rather than on God's.

That's why our Lord gives us this parable. He doesn't want us to rely on our own fickle righteousness, because only leaves us without hope. Later in this same chapter, Jesus warned that it was easier for a camel to walk through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into God's kingdom. He was then asked, "Then who can be saved?" After all, it sounds rather bleak and cynical. Jesus responded, "With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Jesus directs us to the power of the gospel. The gospel always produces faith, hope, and love, which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and rejoices in the truth of God's grace. It was no coincidence that the Holy Spirit caused Luke to record in the next chapter how the tax collector, Zacchaeus, repented and found salvation in Christ.

St. Paul is another example of how the gospel does away with that pessimism and hopelessness of the flesh. Paul had persecuted Christ and his church, because he loved his own righteousness. He seemed like a lost cause, but God was merciful to him. He says that he is not worthy to be called an apostle because of his persecution of the saints, but he is what he is by God's grace. The gospel gave him faith, declaring him righteous for the same of Jesus Christ the righteous one.

It's easy to get cynical. Perhaps you have a child who has strayed from the faith. Or others close to you have sinned against you and don't seem like they will ever change their ways. Or maybe you have a sin in your life that continues to overwhelm and overpower you. Will it ever get better? Will there ever be peace? Don't be a fool! Look to Christ! He has won peace and reconciliation with God by his own blood. He has done the impossible. This is the gospel he gives you right now in his precious words of righteousness, in his body and blood, and by his life giving Spirit. So confess this gospel. Take comfort in it. It is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes.

Jesus did not lose hope even in the most humiliating death on the cross. He knew that his Father would exalt him. He therefore comes to you in your humility, when you have lost all hope in yourself, when you've been embarrassed, ashamed, frustrated with your own sinful thoughts and actions. He will not let you sink into despair and cynicism. He will exalt you at the right time, making you sure of his righteousness. This is how you go back to your house justified. Amen.