

The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
August 23, 2009  
Luke 18:9-14 • (Genesis 4:1-15 • Eph. 2:1-10)

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*“Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Our text is the Holy Gospel for this day, where *“two men went up to the temple to pray—one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”*

*“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”*

In all honesty, it's a prayer too seldom found on our lips. It goes against our nature to acknowledge such weakness, such need. And even if we acknowledge it in principal, how often does this plea for mercy actually find its way onto our lips and shape our everyday lives?

Instead, we are masters at compartmentalizing our life with God from our daily existence. We wake up each morning rarely thinking (let alone saying), “God be merciful to me, a sinner”... rarely reflecting on the fact that our waking to a new day, our life, our home, our family, our job—our very created existence—are all completely due to God's grace and mercy, are all gifts from Him. And that were it not for His mercy we would be nothing.

*“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”* We might say it once a week, or as often as we join in the opening Confession of the Divine Service. But honestly, we don't eat, breathe, and sleep this cry of utter dependence. It's not in our nature to do so.

Instead, we act and think very similar to the unbelievers among whom we live and with whom we work and go to school every day. We are very much centered in ourselves. We are proud of “our” accomplishments—too rarely acknowledging them also as gifts from God. We find security—not in God's mercy—but in how hard we work or save or plan.

And the worst part is that this proud trust in ourselves shapes not just our behavior, but also our thinking about how we stand before God. We don't view ourselves as naked, pitiable creatures, standing fully exposed before God, with nothing in our hands to bring. Rather, we swagger up to the bar of heavenly justice with our good character, the nice things we've done for others, the occasional sacrifices we make for God, and all those qualities in us that the world admires. We swagger up, and we deign to let God occupy one little piece of the pie of our lives.

We are like the Pharisee in today's Gospel who went to the temple to pray, took his proud stance in the sight of everyone, and said:

*“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or [like that tax collector over there]. I fast twice a week. And I give tithes of all that I get.”*

But that approach to life, that attitude toward self and God, is severely judged by the Lord in today's Gospel. For Jesus says that this Pharisee did not go back to his house justified. His trip to the temple was wasted. His prayer to the Lord gained him nothing for eternal life. Rather, our Lord promised for the likes of him, that *“everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.”*

This is actually the same thing that was going on with Cain and Abel.

Before the first murder ever happened, we see two brothers each bringing an offering to the Lord. The firstborn, Cain, brings an offering from the fruit of the ground, while Abel brings an offering from his flock. And like a bolt from heaven we hear that momentous verdict:

*“The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering. But for Cain and his offering He had no regard.”*

Why? Was it because God preferred an offering of lambs over one of produce? (No.)

Was it because of the quality of what each brother offered? (No.)

Was it a capricious decision on God’s part? No!

The Lord Himself answers the question for us in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 4 when He says,

*“By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.”*

It was because of Abel’s faith that the Lord was pleased with his offering—(not his faith as a good work, but faith as a gift from God that laid hold of God’s gracious promise). For you see, Abel trusted God’s promise of a Savior from sin—the promise given to his parents in the Garden of Eden, after their fall into sin. Abel lived, and worked, and brought his offering in faith, praying, *“God be merciful to me, a sinner,”* whereas nothing of the sort is said for the firstborn Cain, who did not offer his sacrifice in faith, but was instead confident in himself and his position as the “first born of the human race”. He was (as Luther said):

*“without faith, without any confession of sin, without any supplication for grace, without trust in God’s mercy, without any prayer for the forgiveness of his sins”.*<sup>1</sup>

*“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*

*“In spite of all the good that your Holy Spirit works in me, and try though I do, I confess that I daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.*

*I worry about the future.*

*I don’t trust very well that you’ll give me what’s best for me, even if it’s not what I would choose.*

*I’m impatient with others, always pointing out their failings while ignoring my own.*

*I use the gifts you’ve given me selfishly, rather than reflecting the image of God by using what you’ve given me to serve others.*

*My days are consumed thinking about myself rather than you.*

*So often I care more about what others will think of me, than about what your Word commands me.”*

*“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*

And the Lord says to you today: I give you My mercy yet again. Today you will go home justified. I hear your prayer for mercy, and I forgive you because I have sent My own dear Son—the Seed of the woman—to crush the tyranny of the Tempter over your life. Because My Son Jesus Christ has sacrificed His own blood for you—His blood which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel<sup>2</sup>—I have shown mercy to you, and I will continue to show it. You have been saved, by grace, from everlasting death.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis commentary

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 12:24

And laying hold of this by faith, and trusting this good news of My grace, everything you do according to your God-given calling is a pleasing offering, a fragrant sacrifice, and a good work in my eyes. Because you are justified through the blood of My Son, I will have regard for you and your offerings. No matter how small, no matter how seemingly insignificant, your whole life is a liturgy of good works—pleasing to Me—because you are pleasing to Me for the sake of My Son Jesus.

*“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

So, dear friends in Christ, as you rise each day and shake the cobwebs from your mind, as you go about your daily tasks, as you go to God’s temple to pray, and in every moment of life, may your prayer always be, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* For in Christ, *everyone who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Almighty and everlasting God, always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve, pour down upon us the abundance of Your mercy, forgiving those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things that we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Christ, our Lord.

Amen.