

Don't Believe in Yourself

Luke 18:9-14

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, August 25, 2019

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Let's talk a moment about justification.

If you are justified, you are right with God and He accepts you. If you are not justified, you are not right with God and He does not accept you. He casts you away from Himself.

In our Lord's parable, the Pharisee went home unjustified. The tax collector went home justified.

The Pharisee went home unjustified because he believed in himself. The tax collector went home justified because he believed in God.

Satan preaches a basic sermon to you. He tells you, "Believe in yourself."

Satan preaches this sermon to you in movies. He preaches this sermon to you on TV. He preaches this sermon to you in countless facebook memes. He preaches this sermon to you in books. He preaches this sermon to you constantly and always. He preaches this sermon to you in public classrooms across this country. It is a sermon designed to send you to hell. It is a sermon designed to leave you unjustified. The sermon is a simple idolatrous sound bite: "Believe in yourself." How many times have you heard this sermon? "Believe in yourself." The devil whispers it in your ear at every opportunity. The devil shouts it at you at every opportunity. The devil uses preachers to tell you to believe in yourself.

Many times when I have pointed out that believing in yourself is idolatry and a great evil, even people who go to church all of the time have looked at me in dismay. You don't see the evil in it. You have gotten used to hearing it. Satan has so surrounded you with this particular lie that you no longer believe it is a lie. That is how it is with Satan's lies. He proliferates them and repeats them over and over again until finally you believe them. And you like believing his lies because his lies appeal to your pride.

What was the temptation in the garden? What lie did Satan tell your mother, Eve? What did he say? He said, "You will not surely die for God knows that when you eat of the fruit of the tree you will be like God knowing good and evil."

It was that lie that worked. It was that lie which served as the final blow to Eve and to Adam. It was upon hearing that lie that they took from the fruit of the tree and they ate and brought death and sin upon us all.

Satan told them that they would be like God. Only God is worthy of faith. If they were to be like God, then they would be worthy of faith. Satan essentially told them, "Believe in yourself."

That is the lie that the Pharisee believes. He believes in himself. When he prays he prays to himself. Now that could be just a figure of speech. That could simply mean that the Pharisee was praying quietly as he stood in the temple. But what a figure of speech it is! He is praying to himself. He is praying and he acts as if he is praying to God, but rather than to talk about God and things about God the Pharisee is talking about himself and the things of himself. If he is talking to God, the Pharisee may as well be talking to himself.

The Pharisee lists all of the evidence to himself as to why he should believe in himself. "I am not like other men. I am not an extortioner. I am not an adulterer. I fast. I tithe."

Is there anything wrong with avoiding extortion? Is there anything wrong with avoiding adultery? Is there anything wrong with fasting? Is there anything wrong with tithing? Would that we all avoided extortion! Would that we all avoided adultery! Would that we all fasted and learned to tell our flesh no! Would that we all tithed! I need to improve myself by a few percentage points.

There is nothing wrong with any of this! But the Pharisee is using this as evidence with God that the Pharisee is righteous before God. The Pharisee is using prayer to exalt himself, not God. The only way that the Pharisee can do this is if the Pharisee believes in himself. He is looking to himself for his righteousness. He is not looking to God for his righteous. The Pharisee believes in himself. The Pharisee goes to his home unjustified.

The tax collector is a tax collector. He extorts all of the time. That is what tax collectors did. He extorted his own people and sold them out to the Romans. He was a collaborator. If he was like most tax collectors, he used his money for adultery, fornication, and gluttony. The tax collector does not tithe. That would mean giving up some of his ill gotten gain. The tax collector does not fast.

But the tax collector believes in God. He does not list his own righteousness when he prays. When he prays the only prayer that he has for himself is to beg for mercy. He does not stand. He stands afar off, not daring even to approach, but daring enough because of the mercy that he expects to find.

The tax collector knows where mercy is to be found. The translations obscure this. I have mentioned this before, but it is worth saying again. There is a common Greek term for asking for mercy. When the blind men ask Jesus for their sight they ask

Him to have mercy on them. When they do they use the common Greek term to request mercy. The lepers do the same, etc. Only this tax collector employs a different term. It gets translated, "Have mercy," because if the translators translated it correctly it would be like ten English words. So here is what the tax collector actually prayed: "Have mercy on me for the sake of the blood that is on the Ark of the Covenant." Do you see why the translators prefer the shorter and easier, "Have mercy"?

The blood on the Ark of the Covenant was blood that God commanded the chief priest to put on the Ark of the Covenant on the Day of Atonement in order to atone for the sins of all of Israel. That blood was on the Ark of the Covenant in the very presence of God in the Holy of Holies behind the curtain of the temple. Since God commanded that blood to be put there in His presence to forgive all of Israel of its sins, the tax collector appeals to that blood for mercy. He not only knows that there is mercy. He knows where mercy is to be found. The tax collector does not believe in himself. He won't even lift up his eyes to heaven. The tax collector believes in God. He doesn't just believe that God exists. Even the demons do that. He believes that God has mercy and knows where God has placed His mercy in order to find it!

That blood on the Ark of the Covenant is a shadow of Christ's blood. That means that when people put their faith in the blood that is on the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, they are actually putting their faith in the blood of Christ since the blood on the Ark of the Covenant is a shadow of the blood of Christ.

The tax collector believes in God. He goes home justified.

There are many ways that we exalt ourselves. There are many ways that we believe in ourselves.

People brought little children to Jesus to have Him touch them. The disciples rebuked them. Why would the disciples rebuke people who brought their children to Jesus?

Our Lord is indignant. He says, "Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them for of such is the Kingdom of God."

The disciples believed in themselves. They were grown up. They were adults. They had mental and physical faculty. Children and infants are weak. They are ignorant. They do not produce. They do not accomplish. Because the disciples were more advance in their faculty than children they thought it was inappropriate for people to bring their children to Jesus. The disciples figured that only they should come to Jesus. Each disciple who did this by virtue of his adulthood believed in himself.

Because Jesus loves His disciples and does not want them to believe in themselves, but rather wants them justified, rebukes the disciples. He welcomes the

children. After all what does a child have to believe in? A child must depend on his parents and on his caretakers. He must depend on his family and on others. He does not have the faculty to do it himself. He must depend on those people whom God has given him in order to live! He has no alternative. Therefore a child believes in God and goes home justified. And the parents who brought the children brought them to Jesus. Like the tax collector they knew where mercy and blessing were to be found.

That is why that when we stand before our Lord Jesus Christ, whether it be in glory or here in the Divine Service segregation of God's people on the basis of age or faculty is inappropriate. Any segregation means that someone is believing in himself and he will go home unjustified.

The rich young man comes up to Jesus and says, "Good teacher. What must I do in order to inherit eternal life?" Our Lord replies, "Why do you call Me good? There is only One who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments."

To us post Nicene-constantinopolitan Christians our Lord's words seem odd. When I call you post Nicene-constantinopolitan Christians all I means is that all of you, Immanuel Lutheran Church, have it figured out that Jesus is God. From the very youngest of you to the very eldest, all of you confess by the grace of God that Jesus is God. He is the incarnate God. He is God in the flesh. How then can the incarnate God say to this rich young man, "Why do you call Me good? There is only One who is good"?

The reason that our Lord says this is because the rich man's question gives away who it is in whom he believes. The rich man believes in himself. He wants to know what he should do in order to inherit eternal life. He does not come to Jesus for blessing. He does not come to Jesus for mercy. Like the Pharisee in the Lord's parable He is using Jesus in order to justify himself. He just wants Jesus to tell him that he has accomplished all things so that he may take glory before men.

Our Lord knows that the guy does not believe in Jesus. Our Lord knows that the rich man believes in himself. Our Lord knows that if the rich man does not believe in Jesus then the rich man does not know that Jesus is God. Our Lord therefore knows that the rich man is assessing Jesus as if Jesus were a man. The rich man calls Jesus good, therefore the rich man believes that men can be good by accomplishing something. He believes that he can be good by doing something. He believes that he can justify himself by his works. The rich man believes in himself!

Our Lord rebukes him. After the man had claimed to have kept all of the commandments our Lord tells him, "One thing you still lack. Go and sell all that you

have and give it to the poor. Then come and follow Me. You will have treasure in heaven.”

The rich man went home said. The rich man went home unjustified. The rich man believed in himself.

Now, where do you find the blood that was shed? The prophecy of Jeremiah has come to pass. There is no longer an Ark of the Covenant. A new one will not be made. The blood that was on the Ark of the Covenant was a shadow of the blood that Jesus shed. The blood that Jesus shed is found in the cup of blessing that you drink.

That is where mercy is found. When you come forward to receive the Sacrament of the Altar you are proclaiming that you know where mercy is found. You are saying that you have found mercy in the blood of Jesus. When you come forward you are appealing to God for mercy for the sake of the blood of Jesus.

When you come forward to this altar, you are proclaiming that you do not believe in yourself. You believe in God!

When you go out of the doors and drive home, you will return to your house justified.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.