

Missed Opportunities & Morsels

Today's lesson about the proud, self-assured Pharisee and the lowly contrite Tax Collector is fairly straight-forward and easy to understand. We get it. *And yet...there are so many things here that we do so often miss.* Case in point: Did you catch how fundamentally different God's justification is from the Pharisee's justification? Understand: I'm not talking about justification through faith alone versus justification by works. We get that. That's easy. I'm talking about how God's justification is **100% complete**. God doesn't justify in half-measures or increments. The tax collector went home *fully and completely justified*; that is, declared fully and completely innocent by God Himself.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, based his justification on a *sliding scale*; a measuring stick that he used to measure himself, not up against God's perfect righteousness and the perfect demands of the Law, *but up against others*. Sure, he wasn't perfect, but he certainly wasn't that bad either. He could certainly be better, but there were a lot of people who were a lot worse than he was. Based on his sliding scale of righteousness, he would've been towards the top, definitely more worthy of God's grace and favor than lowly pariahs like tax collectors. I think of the old joke about maybe not being able to outrun the lion, but you can outrun the rest of the people, so that's all that matters. That's how this Pharisee approached salvation. That's how he justified himself. Maybe he couldn't outrun sin, death, and the devil, but he could outrun the others, which made him better and more deserving than them. This is why we're told he just went home...unjustified. *God did not justify him, not even a little bit.* You see, with God its pass or fail, life or death. There is no in-between or grey area or sliding scale. You either are justified or you're not. You are either forgiven or you're not. All or nothing. How often we miss this in our haste to assure ourselves that we're not like the proud and arrogant Pharisee (which—ironically—makes us no different than the Pharisee). How often we miss this too.

There is another thing we miss in this text, but there are a couple of good reasons for that. For one thing, we're twenty-first American/Gentile Christians. We're not first-century Jews. We're not well-acquainted with Temple life and all the sacrifices and such that went on there on a daily basis. There's also the fact that we have an English translation to work with. So much is lost in translation! When you get into the text in the Greek that it was originally spoken in and written in, this all becomes crystal clear. "*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*" In the original Greek this reads, "*God, be propitiated to me, the sinner.*" Propitiation: that's Old Testament language. That's sacrificial, ark of the covenant, blood-soaked mercy seat language. It's an old word that we just don't use today; a word that means "to appease or satisfy."

What most people don't know in our day and age, and that the first-century Jewish disciples who first heard this parable would **certainly** know and understand, is the fact that shortly before all this worship and prayer is going on between the Pharisee and the tax collector in the inner-court of the temple, the high priest was making the whole-burnt offering to God. He would slay an **unblemished lamb** and offer the whole thing—body and blood—up to God on the altar of sacrifice. This went on **every day—twice a day**—early in the morning and at the end of the day. The fire never went out. The sacrifice never stopped. There was always a propitiating, appeasing sacrifice being offered up to God. The sweet smell of sacrificial smoke always rose to the nostrils of God. And in this way, the people could **always** know and see—morning and evening—that **Almighty God was propitiated; that is, His wrath against sin was satisfied and He was gracious and merciful to them.**

This same daily whole-burnt offering also served as a reminder of the BIG sacrifice that happened once a year on *Yom Kippur*; the **Day of Atonement**. On that single day the priest would slay the perfect, unblemished animal and catch the blood in basins. Half the blood of the sacrifice he would smear on the four corners of the altar, offering it up to God as a propitiating sacrifice; a sacrifice that satisfied God's wrath against sin. He would also sprinkle that same propitiating blood on the mercy seat—the *hilasterion* (Greek)—of the ark of the covenant, which is where God sat and dwelt among His people. That was His earthly throne; **His seat of mercy**. Because His seat was an earthly seat among earthly people, it had to be cleansed. The sacrificial blood of atonement took away all the sinful uncleanness, making the seat holy and pure for our almighty and sinless God to sit and dwell with His beloved people. The other half of the sacrificial blood was taken outside and sprinkled on the people, thereby covering over their sins with the atoning blood of sacrifice. ***In this way, the blood of the unblemished, perfect sacrifice fulfilled two purposes***—it cleansed the wretched stain and filth of sin before God, satisfying His wrath and paying the wage of sin, which is death, and it also covered over the people, letting them know ***in a very real and tangible way*** that God was propitiated and satisfied and merciful and He forgave them, not because of their works and deeds and achievements, but because they were covered over in the blood of propitiation; the blood of all-atoning sacrifice.

So...what does all this have to do with the tax collector and his plea for mercy? **Remember: The original Greek does not say the tax collector asked God to be merciful to him.** It says that the tax collector asked God to be **propitiated** towards him; that is, be ***hilasterion-ed (the blood-soaked mercy seat of God, where He would dwell with His people in all grace, mercy, and peace)*** towards him. Let me ask you: Where was this lowly man's faith and trust? Was it in his works, his wealth, his social standing, or his IQ? No! ***His faith was grounded and centered in the all-atoning sacrifice of the lamb that had just been offered up on the altar before he went in to pray.*** You can picture this guy beating his chest

with one hand and pointing to the altar—the earthly throne and mercy seat of God—with the other. *“God, be propitiated towards me; be at-one (atonement) with me. Show mercy and forgiveness to me, not because of me, but because of the all-atoning body and blood of the sacrificial lamb.”*

Think about that. This guy knew his sin. ***He didn't try to justify himself.*** *“You see God, I have my reasons for doing and saying the things I do. Let me explain myself to you and you'll understand.”* That wasn't this guy's game. He knew the truth of his depravity. That's why he called himself ***“the sinner.”*** There's another thing so often missed in our English translations. The English translation often changes that definite article to “a sinner,” but that's not what he said. He truly saw himself, ***through the eyes of faithful repentance, as the sinner.*** No one else factored in to his repentant faith. It was between him and God alone. He didn't fall into the Pharisaical trap of looking for a measuring stick or a sliding scale to ***compare and contrast his good qualities and his sins*** with others in an attempt to justify himself. Instead, he used God's measuring stick and God's measuring stick alone; that measuring stick that says that the wages of sin—all sin—is death. As I said earlier, ***God doesn't use a sliding scale. Its pass or fail; life or death.***

According to God's measuring stick, this lowly tax collector didn't measure up. The tax collector knew it, and he knew that he never would or could measure up. That's why he called on God for mercy, forgiveness, and atonement. Basically, he held God's feet to the fire, holding God to His promise to be merciful and at peace because of the life that was sacrificed for his sin. Like I said, you can picture this guy beating his chest with one hand and pointing to the altar—the earthly throne and mercy seat of God—with the other. *“God, You promised. Be propitiated towards me; be at-one (atonement) with me. Show mercy and forgiveness to me, not because of me, but because of the all-atoning body and blood of the sacrificial lamb.”* ***His was true and faithful worship.*** That's why Jesus says he went home justified—completely, 100% justified; not a little bit, or somewhat justified, but completely and totally declared innocent. The other guy just went home. While the other guy ***justified himself to God***; that is, declared himself to be a pretty good guy who was righteous and holy if he did say so himself...at least better than the other schmucks, the tax collector, in true, faithful repentance, ***was justified by God Himself*** simply because of his trust in God's promise of atonement and redemption. God declared him totally and completely forgiven. God was “at one” with him, ***by grace through faith.***

And that's where we'll end for today. We've got more than enough to chew on with these Gospel morsels. Besides, I can't and I won't stand here today and give you some false, feel-good “moral of the story” that if you just act more like the tax collector and less like the Pharisee, your life will be awesome. I can't and I won't brow-beat you and tell you that you need to be more like the tax collector

and less like the Pharisee. For one thing, that would be giving you the Law as a means for your salvation. That would be *wrongly encouraging* you to do something about your justification. Scripture is very clear in telling us that there's nothing we can do to justify ourselves and save ourselves.

Instead, I'll end by simply standing here and pointing you east, pointing you to behold the glory of God coming from the east. ***Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*** Behold! The Lamb of God, who comes to you today to abide with you and dwell with you; to have table fellowship with you as He Himself feeds you with His life-giving Word and all-atoning Body and Blood; Body and Blood that He laid down as an all-redeeming sacrifice on the altar of His cross; Body and Blood that He Himself raised up in victory, proving once and for all that sin, death, and the devil have been vanquished. Look to this Lamb. Hold fast to this Lamb of God alone. He—and He alone—is your way, your truth, your life...your justification. If this Good News of your **complete justification** in Christ alone and because of Christ alone doesn't send you home with a joy and a peace that surpasses all human understanding, *nothing else will*.

To Christ alone be all glory, all praise, and all honor.

AMEN