

## Faith...in Faith?

I think it's safe to say that everyone here is very familiar with the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It's not exactly a deep theological mystery that needs cracking. We get it. The Pharisee, so proud and arrogant and self-secure in his good works, is held up by Jesus as the quintessential lesson in "what not to do." Ironically, the first thoughts that often spring to our mind upon hearing this story sound something like, "*Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee. Thank God I'm not like that guy.*" Yeah...that kind of attitude is exactly what got him into trouble too. Oh...but it's different with us, right?

And before we go any further, we do need to clear a couple of other things up. So often we hammer the Pharisee because of his good works. That only makes sense, right? We know that works don't save you. You're saved through faith alone in God's grace alone, which He shows to us because of Christ alone. God gives us grace, not because of who we are or what we do, but because of who He is (think: Cain being shown grace and protection). We get it.

But...the problem arises when we begin to treat this lesson as if doing good works was the thing that Jesus condemned (and this does happen). It's NOT that doing good works was bad. It's not that the works the Pharisee did were bad. In fact, *they truly were good works*. There's **NOTHING** wrong or sinful or damning about tithing or fasting, two things he highlighted in his "prayer" (boast) to God. None of these things, in and of themselves, were the issue. In fact, we could all stand to use a little more of it in our own daily lives. I'll say this: The Pharisee never treated worship as a chore that he needed a break from. "*Pastor is sick. Sweet! I don't have to go to church today! Day off!*" The Pharisee did far more and far better works than all of us put together. The works weren't the problem. The problem was the fact that he was putting his trust in his good works. He was holding his good works up and presenting them to God as *reasons* why God should be gracious and merciful to him, *as if God owed him*.

Now, I know I don't need to press this issue with any of us. The fact of the matter is that we're **all** guilty of doing this same exact thing. If you don't believe this is true of you, ask yourself how often you've looked to God and wondered aloud why bad things happen to you. Ask yourself how often you've taken attitude with God because things aren't working out the way you want, and you feel you deserve better. "*I volunteer, I put this much in the plate, I'm in church fairly regularly...at least more than most people. Doesn't any of that count for anything? I do all this, Lord, and this how you treat me? What gives?*" **The Pharisee couldn't say it better himself.**

And as bad as such a Pharisaical attitude is (and that's EXACTLY what it is, and I already know some of you are adamant about letting everyone around you know that you're such a "humble, faithful Christian" who would *NEVER* ask such foolish questions of God; you know...thank God you're not like that), it's actually preferable to the attitude that believes that your holiness meter is *so red-lined and so pegged out* that you don't have to go to church or volunteer or put money in the plate or do anything that even remotely resembles *the fruits of a practicing Christian*, because you're that good. You're saved because of your faith, right? You don't need to worry about any of that stuff that hypocrites and Pharisees like me worry about.

And before you go and catch me in the handshake line and tell me that no one HAS TO go to church in order to be saved, at least not every single Sunday, do us all a favor and keep your *Pharisaical ignorance* to yourself. Better yet, repent of such foolishness. **True, you don't HAVE TO go to church every week, or even at all, in order to be saved.** You're saved; you're redeemed and forgiven, not because you show up and punch the clock and go through the motions, but because you trust in and hold fast to what Christ has done for you on the bloody altar that is His cross. You don't HAVE TO do anything in order to be saved.

But that's just it: a Christian is never concerned with what they HAVE TO do. *Only Pharisees are concerned with such self-serving, self-glorifying things.* For the Christian; for the justified child of faith, who understands and actually believes what's going on here, it's **never** a matter of having to do anything. Recognized through the lens of justification, none of this is a chore. Rather, it's an *opportunity*. By God's grace, *you are free to do whatever you please*, and that includes Sunday mornings, and Christmas Eves, and Easter Sundays. But...what pleases the baptized, redeemed child of God? Answer: That which pleases their heavenly Father.

The justified child of God doesn't seek to do good, God-pleasing works *in order to be saved*, but out of the joy that they **are** saved. Good works, something as simple as showing up, are the fruits of faith that are borne *in response to God's undeserved gifts of mercy, grace, and love*. Good works are how repentant, saving faith says "Thank you." You see, faith recognizes the opportunity that is worship; the opportunity that God gives us to come to Him and be in His holy presence, His holy house, and to receive from His hand His undeserved and overflowing gifts of grace, mercy, and peace. **Where else would I be?** Faith wants *nothing more* than to be right where God is, dwelling with His people, and giving out His gifts of grace, mercy, and peace.

That's what set the tax collector apart from the Pharisee. Truth be told: That's what sets the tax collector apart from us. Like the Pharisee, we do tend to take great pride and comfort in ourselves, and that does include our faith. *We*

*often take great comfort in the fact that we have faith.* It's easy to point the finger at people who have faith in all the wrong things, be it their works, their volunteer hours, their tax-deductible donation statement, the fact that their name is engraved on a bronze plaque or stained glass. It's easy to pick those Pharisees out of the lineup. ***Thank God we're not like them, right?*** It's quite another thing, though, to recognize the Pharisee staring back at you from the mirror. So many people, just like the Pharisee, take great comfort in the fact that they have faith. **Basically, they have faith in their faith.** They're good Christians. Just ask them. They love Jesus. They have faith. ***Okay...faith in what?*** What is the object of your faith? To what/whom does your faith hold fast? What sort of fruits does that faith bear? Could anyone ***accuse*** you of being a faithful, repentant, justified Christian? Could anyone pick you out of a lineup?

The tax collector had faith in God's promise of mercy and forgiveness. You hear it in his heart-rending prayer to God as he beats his chest and calls upon God to be *hilasterioned* to him, the sinner. *Hilasterion*: that's Old Testament/Sacrificial language. "*Hilasterion*" is the word we translate as "propitiated," which also means "to be satisfied towards" (e.g., Rom 3:25). It's also the word we translate as "mercy seat," as in, the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant; the very throne and dwelling place of almighty God with His people, dwelling with them in mercy and peace because that seat had been sprinkled over and covered with the all-atoning blood of sacrifice. The wage of sin—***his sin***—had been paid in full. God was and is propitiated in Christ Jesus and because of Christ Jesus.

This is what the tax collector was trusting in—the *hilasterion*; the blood-soaked dwelling place of God; the blood-soaked sacrificial promise of God. You can almost picture him beating his chest with one hand, confessing his sinful reality to God, and pointing to the Holy of Holies with the other hand, holding God's own Word and Promise up to Him, calling on God to remember and keep His Word to be gracious and merciful—to be ***propitiated***—towards him, not because of who he was or what he had done (like the Pharisee did), but because of who God was and what He had promised and what He had done.

Think about that! This guy's trust/faith wasn't merely in the fact that he had faith or merely in the fact that he showed up, punched the clock, said the right things, and made a donation (us). ***His faith wasn't in his "faith," but in God's Word and Promise! His faith was in God's Words and actions.*** And this is why this lowly tax collector, an absolute dreg of society; a guy you would hope your kids would never grow up to become or even associate with, went home justified by God; that is, declared 100% innocent and forgiven by God Himself, because he trusted in and held fast to God and His Word/Promise alone.

Folks: Look around. Nothing has changed. This same God and Lord that the tax collector trusted in still dwells with you today. His promises still hold true.

That divine justification, “*It is finished,*” sounds through all eternity. ***It sounds in your ears today.*** In Christ; in Christ’s blood-soaked, all-atoning sacrifice, God is eternally propitiated and satisfied...towards you. ***Your sins are 100% forgiven.*** More than that, God continues to pair His 100% Gospel justification with real and tangible means—Word, Water, Bread, and Wine. ***Here is God, right where He says He is; right where He tells you to look—where His Word is rightly taught and His sacraments rightly administered!*** Here is His grace and peace; grace and peace you can see, touch, and taste; grace and peace you can read, mark, learn, and inwardly-digest. **This is God’s gift to you...not your gift to God.** All this is yours, not because you’ve earned it; not because you’re such a good person and God can’t help but want to scratch your back so that you’ll keep doing all those wonderful things for Him, like showing up every third week or so, unless of course it’s soccer season or deer season or the grandkids slept over last night or it’s rainy or you have some yard work to do or you just don’t feel like going because, after all, didn’t you just go at Easter? ***No! All this is yours because this is who God is—just, righteous, holy, merciful, long-suffering, patient, loving.***

I would hope that all this would truly mean something to you. I can’t make this the most important thing to you. Either it is or it isn’t, and the fruits you bear don’t lie. This Good News; these Good and undeserved gifts of God’s grace [the crucifix; altar; Holy Communion; Holy Baptism] is what saving faith holds fast to, no matter what the situation is in life. This is what repentant saving faith hungers and thirsts for...always, not just for the self, but for everyone that God puts in our life. Not a counterfeit. Not a feel-good substitute that makes the wife and the grandkids happy but also denies Christ in the process. No. ***Saving faith wants nothing other than Christ and His gifts.*** Saving faith settles for nothing less than Christ and His gifts. **This is the most important thing to a Christian—Christ.**

May this be the most important thing to you, ever and always, ***in good times, in bad times, and everything in between.*** May the blessed reality of your 100% justification in Christ take root in your heart and spring up to bear good and God-pleasing fruits of sanctification in all that you say, think, and do.

To God alone be all the glory, praise, and honor...AMEN