

+ Luke 18:9-14 + Ironies of the Passion: This Man Went Home Justified¹ +
+ Ash Wednesday + 10 February 2016 +

"It's not my fault!" Sound familiar? Kids say it. Grown-ups say it. Students say it. Workers say it. Retirees say it. Even Adam in the Garden of Eden said it. We've all said it. Yet it's never just "It's not my fault!" The faultless almost always try to justify themselves explaining why "It's not my fault!"

...But what does that mean to "justify yourself"? It means you make an excuse for what you did. You try to shift the blame and get out of whatever consequences might be coming. It's rather sad and ironic that we use the word *justify* for that, because *justify* is one of the most important words in the Bible. God *justifies* or declares us not guilty, innocent in his courtroom.

Yet when you use it in everyday speech, it's almost always an excuse. That subtle difference illustrates the theme of our Lenten meditations this year. This Lenten season we're going to hear about *irony*. *Irony* has been defined as "**a situation that is strange...because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you expected.**" (Merriam-Webster.com) Jesus' passion is filled with irony. Tonight Jesus tells a parable that is both ironic and surprising because an unexpected man goes home *justified*

Jesus was on his final trip to the city of Jerusalem when he told this parable. In the crowds following him were people who were confident in their own righteousness and therefore looked down on everyone else. So Jesus told them about two men who went up to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee prayed, "**God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.**" That prayer makes you cringe, doesn't it? Yet not so much for Jesus' hearers. Remember how they viewed themselves—more righteous than others? Jesus' story didn't sound all that ridiculous. So how did this Pharisee sound to them?

To you and me, the word *Pharisee* means proud, self-righteous, hypocritical. The gospels back up that assessment. Yet to the first-century Jew, *Pharisee* meant something else. The Apostle Paul was raised a Pharisee and was quite proud of that label before he came to faith. The Pharisees were the people who defended a strict interpretation of the Old Testament law. They held that the Bible was truly God's Word—a view that we and our church body share today.

So when this *Pharisee* said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer—that was all true. He didn't break into people's houses. He had never committed a crime that could get him thrown in jail. He didn't sleep around. He didn't even have a traffic ticket. In first-century Jewish culture, there was a very clear difference between him and the tax collector.

Tax collectors collaborated with the Romans, who had conquered the Jewish nation. They willingly collected taxes from their own people, but the Romans let the tax collectors charge far more than the government required and then keep the difference. You find them in the company of prostitutes and "sinners." They were considered the scummy crud at the bottom of society's barrel. That wasn't the Pharisee though!

Not only did this Pharisee avoid all that, but he gave 10% of his income to the Lord just like the Old Testament laws commanded. He fasted twice a week over and above the once-a-year fast that God had commanded in the Law of Moses. It's pretty easy to see why that Pharisee would be so pleased with himself, and Jesus' listeners would've agreed with him.

If this man was so good, what was the problem? Arrogance filled his heart. Scripture tells us that even if you do the right thing, if it's for the wrong reason, you're still guilty in God's sight. The Pharisee was confident in his own righteousness. He thought he was earning points with God by what he was doing, even going over and above God's requirements. Yet this man ignored what God's Word says about recognizing that he was a sinner saved by God's mercy alone. In fact, his additions to God's laws were actually an attempt to rewrite God's laws about having a pure heart and avoiding lust and greed with his own works. In the end, he was still guilty.

¹ Sermon adapted with permission from a 2016 Lenten sermon series by Pr. Geoffrey Kieta available from Northwestern Publishing House (<http://www.nph.net>).

My friends, could you be confident in your own righteousness? Could you ever echo the Pharisee's prayer? "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people in this pornographic and materialistic society. I avoid Internet sites that no one should look at. I don't beat my wife or children. I don't use drugs. I keep my language clean. I stay out of trouble and even attend a church that cares about purity of doctrine and practice unlike those other churches down the street. Plus look at all I do for my congregation! I've served as a leader or a teacher or a builder or a musician. I give 10 percent of my income to the church. I never even miss a Lenten service when it's snowing. Plus I'm always the first one to help and volunteer."

Could you or I offer that prayer? Sadly, we could, but doesn't God command us to keep his doctrine pure and to stand on the truth? He most certainly does. Doesn't he expect us to avoid Internet sites that lead to lust? Doesn't he expect us to love our spouses and children? Doesn't he call us to support his work with our offerings, time, and talents? Yes, he does!

So what's the problem? Arrogant pride. If you do all that because you think you're righteous before God, if you break your arm patting yourself on the back for all you do, if you ignore the areas of your heart and life where you sin and tell yourself that you're a better Christian than another, then you are still guilty in God's sight. All of us are sinners born and bred. Sin corrupts even our best efforts and makes them filthy rags in God's sight.

That's why you and I so desperately need Jesus. Jesus is the only reason God ever accepts your efforts. He died and paid for the sin that contaminates your every effort. He died and paid for the arrogant pride and sin that tries to rewrite God's laws with your own attempted works. His suffering and death erase every record of your sin, and his resurrection makes you perfect in God's sight. God sees Jesus when he looks at you. That's why what you do here pleases him. You have been declared righteous—*justified*—because of what Jesus did for you. So now you can humbly serve your Lord with your offerings and time and effort. Because of Christ and his mercy, you can do those difficult things like avoiding temptation in your entertainment choices or standing up for the truth in the face of opposition.

The irony in this parable is that the man who thought he was a committed, churchgoing follower of God failed to grasp the meaning of repentance for a new life. Yet the man who lived a sinful life understood what God means by repentance. So he threw himself on God's mercy.

The tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven. He simply prayed, "**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**" He knew that he couldn't make defense in God's courtroom. He couldn't even get out of God's punishment on a technicality. God had before him all the evidence for every selfish action, hurtful word, and loveless thought. So the tax collector understood that the only verdict God's court could possibly render was guilty.

So he threw himself on God's mercy. What is mercy? Mercy is that desire to help someone who's in trouble. It's what you feel when you see news reports about cities destroyed by hurricanes and then send money to buy blankets and medicine. God has mercy on sinners. He knows that you and I deserve to die and go to hell, but he loves you and wants you to reach heaven. That's why God sent his Son to live and die and rise again to cleanse that record of your sin.

In his mercy, God comes to you in his Word with that good news. With his Word God fills your broken heart with repentance leading you to humbly confess your sin and plead for his forgiveness. Repentance begins with humility—brutal honesty about your own guilt and inability to earn God's forgiveness. Yet God also fills your broken heart with trust in his mercy clinging by faith to Christ and his forgiveness.

Every day you ask for mercy for that day's sins because you know mercy is coming—and it does. God doesn't make excuses for your sins. He doesn't say, "Well, they didn't know any better. They live in a society that's growing more and more anti-Christian every day. I'm just glad they're trying hard." No, God does something better. He comes to you in the Gospel and declares you not guilty—*justified*. He reminds you how he washed away your sins in Holy Baptism. He personally gives you the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus so you can be confident that the verdict is not guilty.

No one who clings in faith to Jesus can say, "I thank you, God, that I'm not like other people." True faith is humble: "I thank you, God, that you don't give me what I deserve. I thank you, God, that you have had mercy on me. No one knows better than you how guilty I really am. Yet you declared me not guilty. You gave me love and forgiveness. For that I thank you, Lord."

Irony is written all over Jesus' passion. Here Jesus himself illustrated that irony when he spoke this parable. God cares about your heart. God cares about your faith. No matter how sinful you've been, you will live with him in heaven. Trust him. Admit your guilt to him and cling to his mercy in Christ. Go home today *justified* because God has declared you not guilty. Amen.