

Reformation

Text: Luke 18:9-14 (NIV)

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Theme: Where Can We Find a Merciful God?

It is only a few years until we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The years leading up to that point in Luther’s life were a time of turmoil for him. At his father’s bequest, he entered the University of Erfurt in 1501 to become a lawyer. You might know the story of how he was so terrified in a thunderstorm in Stotternheim in 1505, that he vowed that he would become a monk if St. Anne would save him. To his father’s chagrin, Luther left the university and entered the monastery that year. St. Anne was the patron saint of miners, which was his father’s occupation.

He had a couple of weeks to get his things in order. Then he presented himself to the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. According to the rite at that time, the candidate would prostrate himself on the steps of the altar from where the prior would ask, “What do you seek?” The answer was, “God’s grace and mercy.”¹

However, Luther was never able to find a merciful God in the monastery. He came to see God as an angry Judge, who justly could condemn him for all of his sins. He tried to be the best monk possible. Yet, his unworthiness before God only made him fall deeper into despair. In 1507 he was ordained and conducted his first mass. He was so pleased that his father came, but his father only magnified his guilt when he flared up in front of all the guests, “You learned scholar, have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and your mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age.”²

It seemed as though Luther could not satisfy his earthly father or his heavenly Father at any point. With regard to his faith, he fell deeper and deeper into despair. A pilgrimage to Rome only made the situation worse. Then in the year 1513, 500 years ago this year, the vicar of the Augustinian order Johann von Staupitz had an idea. He would take this floundering monk, who was beginning to hate God, and have him lecture on the Bible. This proved to be his “road to Damascus.” He began with the Psalms, then in 1515 Romans, and 1516 Galatians. For the first time Luther began to study the Scriptures, and what He found for the first time was a merciful God in our Savior Jesus Christ.

¹Bainton, *Here I Stand*, page 27

²Bainton, page 31

I. The problem with the church at that time was that the wrong parts of repentance were stressed.

The church stressed contrition, which is our sorrow over sin. There is an important distinction to be made about the contrition of that time. It was not the sorrow that we have sinned against the God who loves us, but the sorrow that we have sinned against the God who can punish us for all of eternity. There is some of both in the Bible, but God was never looked at as our loving Father, but as a stern judge who will send you to hell for all of eternity if you do not recognize every sin and repent of them. During his first lectures Luther still had this attitude when he said with regard to Psalm 51, **“He who justifies himself condemns God, who through Scripture states that he is a sinner. . . . He who judges himself and confesses his sin justifies God and affirms his truthfulness, because he is saying about himself what God is saying about him.”** True penance was self-accusation. People were encouraged to look at themselves and continually recognize how bad that they were.

The other thing that the church stressed was satisfaction. It was believed that Christ could take away the guilt of your sin, but not the punishment. Purgatory would be needed to cleanse you of your sins before you could enter into heaven. But there were ways to lessen that time in purgatory in this life. One of them was by going on pilgrimages to holy places such as Rome. Another was to purchase indulgences for you or even for loved ones. Luther would write the 95 Theses to debate the matter of indulgences. Another was very popular in Wittenberg at the time. Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise had an extensive collection of relics, which included hay from the manger, a twig from the Moses’ burning bush, and several pieces of Jesus’ cross. There were over 17,000 pieces. They were displayed on All Saints’ Day, November 1, and by paying a price to view them, a person would be spared 1,902,202 year in purgatory. It was looked at that you could be like the pharisee in today’s text. By showing God many of the righteous things that you had done, He would take away your punishment.

II. What Luther came to know, what the importance of God’s mercy in Christ.

The tax collector in our text did not trust in his own contrition or what he could do to make up for his sin. He put His trust in God’s mercy. That is what Luther learned by studying the Scriptures. What saves us is not our contrition or works, but God’s mercy in our Savior Jesus Christ. Luther was encouraged to publish his early lectures on the Psalms, but within a year, he realized how little he understood of them at first. He said that they should be burned. Many years later he again lectured on Psalm 51 in 1533. Listen to how far he came when he spoke about the first verse, “Have mercy on me, O God,”

Let all men sing this verse with David and acknowledge that they are sinners but that God is righteous, that is, merciful. This confession is a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God, and David invites us to it. He wants this to be a teaching for the whole world. When the devil or our conscience accuses us because of our sins, we can freely confess that our sins are many and great, but not despair because of them. For though our sins are many and great, nevertheless we are taught here that the mercies of God are also many and great. With this argument all the saints have defended themselves against Satan, that though they were sinners, yet they are made holy by this knowledge,

according to Isaiah 53:11: “The knowledge of Christ will justify many.”³

Luther came to understand that the center of our faith is not how sorry we are for our sins or how much we try to make up for them. The key is that we trust that Jesus Christ paid for all of those sins on the cross. We trust that God loved sinners like us so much, that He sent His Son to save us so that our sins are forgiven, and we become the children of God, whom He will love and care for, for all of eternity.

III. What does all of this mean for us?

It is tempting to be like the pharisee in our text and try to fool ourselves that we have earned God’s favor. But God’s Word is clear, “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” Whenever God’s Word reveals your sins, confess them and cry to Him for mercy. But don’t keep your eyes on yourself and your shortcomings. Look to Christ, and there you will find the merciful heart of God. He takes away your sin. He rejoices that you are His. He promises that nothing will ever separate you from His love. There is nothing that you can do to take away either your guilt or punishment because Jesus has taken our full guilt and punishment on Himself on the cross. Trust in Him. Live in His love for you, and you will go from the depths of despair to the joy that you are God’s dear child in Christ.

The whole point of the Reformation was to seek God’s mercy. Luther discovered that we don’t not find God’s mercy in our contrition or satisfaction for our sins, but in Christ, who loved us and redeemed poor sinners like us. Look to Christ and you will find the mercy and love of God.

Amen.

***Pastor Don Hougard
Benediction Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, WI
October 27, 2013***

³Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 12: Selected Psalms I (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.) (Ps 51:1). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House