

Pentecost 20 / October 23, 2022

Luke 18:13

“God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Our gospel this morning takes place at the Jerusalem temple, where two men went to pray. The Jerusalem temple was the most important place for Jewish people to offer prayers at the time of Christ. Those who lived in Jerusalem would pray daily at the temple if they were able; during the morning sacrifice and again during the evening sacrifice. People outside Jerusalem, including the Jews living in the dispersion throughout the Roman world, would pray facing the direction of the temple. The temple was important as the place where the Lord gave His Name to dwell. The Lord gave the temple as a place of prayer, both for Jews and foreigners. The Lord promised that when He heard from heaven, His dwelling place that He would forgive.

People did not need to be at the temple or even to face its direction when they prayed, for the Lord to hear and forgive. The Lord heard and forgave because of His mercy. The temple embodied God’s mercy in forgiveness, which He expressed through the sacrifices that were offered daily for the atonement of sin. The temple was a rock-solid symbol of God’s kindness and His promise to forgive all who come to Him in the humility of repentance and pray with the tax collector, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” We might think this parable is about the contrast between a humble man, who seeks forgiveness and a proud man, who boasts of his goodness. But really it is a parable about the Lord, who hears our prayers and is gracious in forgiveness. The Psalmist sang, “With you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.”

We pray to the Lord because He is rich in forgiveness. We know He is rich in forgiveness, because He gave Christ as the true sacrifice for our sins and the sins of all people, once and forever. Our prayers are not based on the good we have done. Our prayers are based on the goodness of Jesus, who sacrificed Himself for our sins. We should never let our sins keep us from praying to the Lord. The Lord hears and receives sinners for the sake of Jesus, who cleanses us of our unrighteousness with His holy blood. Jesus wants us to pray for all things, but especially for forgiveness. When we pray, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” the Lord hears from heaven and for the sake of Jesus, He forgives.

Both the Pharisee and the tax-collector begin their prayers addressing, “God.” God is the English rendering, but the Greek text literally says, “The God.” It sounds awkward in English, so translators always exclude the definite article. However, it is in the Greek text and would have been vocalized by Greek speakers. Although the original language spoken by the Pharisee and Tax Collector was Aramaic, I have no doubt that they vocalized the definite article in their speech. The significance of the definite article is to remind us that there is one God, the Lord who made heaven, the earth and all that is in it. In our language “God” is a generic word for anything people refer to as a superior, supreme, or divine being. Writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul said there are many things called God, “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist and one Lord, Jesus Christ.” The definite article reminds us there is One God, the Father and one Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The definite article reminds us that we are praying to the God who reveals Himself in scripture. The God who made Himself known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the Most High God. The God who made Himself known to Moses and Israel in the Old Testament as “The Lord.” He is the God, who makes Himself known to all people in Jesus. He is the Saviour of all who call on Him in faith. We do not pray to God in general, or to God as people imagine Him. We pray to God

who has revealed Himself in scripture as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught us to pray to God as our Father in heaven. We pray to God as a loving Father, because throughout the scriptures and especially in Jesus, He reveals Himself as kind, compassionate and full of forgiveness. We pray to the God, who redeemed the world from sin and death in Christ Jesus and who gives forgiveness freely and without limit, to all who pray to Him saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Human beings, even in our fallen spiritual condition, have the capacity and ability to identify many aspects of God. We know in our hearts there is God. We know from the scope of the universe God is powerful. We sense a little of the majesty of God's being in the majesty of the earth. We know God is holy and righteous through our conscience, by which we know right and wrong, sense our sin and the barrier sin creates between us and God. We feel in our souls that we must and can do something to take away that barrier and atone for our sin. Some people offer sacrifices to take away their sin. Everyone tries to do good things, like the Pharisee, to bring us close to God and validate our right to stand in His presence. But God doesn't receive us because of our goodness. God doesn't accept us because of our sacrifices. He receives us because He is full of mercy. He accepts us because of the sacrifice He made for us in Christ Jesus.

Mercy is the most important aspect and quality of God from our perspective. Whether we realize it like the Tax Collector, or not, like the Pharisee, we all need God's mercy. Whether we realize it or not, we are all sinners in relation to God. The Pharisee had many good qualities. He fasted twice a week, to be reminded that "humans live not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." He gave a tenth of his income to remember that all good things come from the Lord, who opens His hand "and satisfies the desire of every living thing." He wasn't an extortioner, adulterer or even a thief (as tax collectors were prone to be). He was a pretty good guy in comparison to most people, not just the Tax Collector. But he was still a sinner, as are all of us.

He needed God's mercy just as much as the Tax Collector. In fact, he needed it more, because he didn't realize he needed it. If he really believed in the God he referred to as "The God," he would have remembered first and foremost, God's mercy. If he really believed in "The God," he would have known that all people, including himself, need "The God's" mercy in forgiveness. God is merciful. He gave Jesus to die for the sins of tax collectors and Pharisees. He gave Jesus to die for your sins and for mine. To all who pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner," The God gives forgiveness, freely and fully for the sake of Jesus.

We should allow neither our sins, or our sense of goodness to keep us away from God and His mercy in Christ Jesus. Sin keeps us away from God when we live in it and do not resist it. Isaiah said to Israel, "Your sins have separated you from your God." Unrepented sin creates a barrier between us and God, even as it does between us and other people. The tax collector needed to repent. Sin keeps us away from God when we approach God on the basis of being good people. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people..." The Pharisee needed to repent.

We repent when we see our sins for what they are, an offense in the presence of God. We repent when we see our need for God's forgiveness. We repent when we come to Him through Jesus and pray "God be merciful to me a sinner." In terms of our relationships with each other, we are a mixture of good and bad. But in relation to God, we are all sinners in need of His mercy in forgiveness. God doesn't compare us to each other, or any one else. He compares us to Himself

and in that comparison we all fail, because everyone sins and falls short of the glory of God. We all need to pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner." When we pray, God answers with forgiveness for the sake Jesus.

Jesus atoned for the sin of the tax collectors and the Pharisees. His body was the true temple, by which God fully expressed His presence in the world and His mercy in forgiveness, for all to receive. His blood atoned for the sin of every human soul. St. John wrote, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world." He is the Saviour of all people as Paul said, but "especially of those who believe." He calls us to put our faith in Him as Saviour, confident that through Him we receive God's mercy in forgiveness. Everyone who prays to God through Him receives the mercy of forgiveness. God grant us always to pray, seek His mercy and believe that in Christ we are forgiven and received as dearly loved children. In Jesus' Name.