

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 23, 2022

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## Going Home Justified

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, we're coming in to the home stretch of the church year. Which means we're also coming to the end of Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary. We have only a little time left with Luke before we turn our attention to Matthew's Gospel beginning the first Sunday of Advent. As we close out our time with Luke, I am struck by the recurring themes we see still at work here in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of this Gospel.

You may recall my argument from some time ago (last Advent), that all of the Gospels tell you within the first few chapters what their major themes will be. Mark's theme is found halfway through the first chapter: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"<sup>1</sup> Mark wants his audience to come to understand that the kingdom of God has come near in the very person of Jesus Christ; and that encountering Jesus leads to repentance and the good news of God's grace.

John's Gospel lays out his themes in what is known as the Prologue (John 1:1-18). The key verse of the Prologue, and the most important theme of John's Gospel, is found towards the end of the Prologue: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."<sup>2</sup> John will go on to provide example after example of what grace upon grace looks like. John will also make it abundantly clear that Jesus is God's Word Incarnate.

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<sup>1</sup> [Mark 1:14-15](#) (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> [John 1:14, 16-18](#) (NRSV)

Matthew, as the most “Jewish” of the Gospel writers, is very concerned with how Jesus fulfills the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. He even starts his Gospel off with a genealogy that illustrates Jesus’ *bona fides*. But after this introduction we will quickly find the major theme for Matthew: “All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’”<sup>3</sup> So not only does Matthew get to reference prophecy in this verse, he makes it clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to be with Israel, and even more broadly, to be with “us.”

At this point you may be wondering why I’m recapping this information when I’ve already shared it. Well, first off, it’s important information, I want you to learn it well! And second, as I mentioned before, the parable we find ourselves reading today continues the major theme of Luke’s Gospel, which the author introduces right in the first chapter. This theme is most clearly expressed in Mary’s beautiful song of praise (aka the Magnificat): “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”<sup>4</sup> With that theme in mind, who in our parable is the proud one? The powerful one? Who is the lowly one? Who is rich and who is hungry?

Luke wants to show us that Jesus turns the world upside down. We could almost title Luke’s Gospel as “the great reversal” or something similar. The author seems to take delight in subverting our expectations. And our parable today is right in line with this theme of Luke’s. The characters introduced would have us expecting the Pharisee to be the hero and the tax collector to be the zero (unless the audience remembers previous parables which have generally not cast the Pharisees in anything like a positive light).

As both men begin to pray we quickly find a subversion of the typical expectations. Before even examining the content of each prayer, just take a look at the pronouns used. While he starts off appropriately focused on God, the Pharisee quickly shifts to himself; “I thank...I fast...I give...” It’s “I,” “I,” “I!” Now, the tax collector also uses the singular pronoun, “me,” but in his case it is to identify himself as the object of God’s prayed-for merciful action. While

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<sup>3</sup> [Matthew 1:22-23](#) (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> [Luke 1:51-53](#) (NRSV)

the Pharisee lists off all of his accomplishments, the tax collector identifies himself only as “a sinner.”

Both men are praying to God. Both men have studied the same Torah. Both men appropriately address God in prayer. Both men are earnestly communicating what they feel is important about themselves to God. But only one of them goes home justified. And it’s not the one we should expect!

Perhaps we need to look more closely at what Jesus might mean when he says that the tax collector went home “justified” while the pharisee did not. What does it mean to be “justified” and what about the sinner’s prayer led to his justification? Jesus doesn’t actually use this term all that often, which can make it more difficult to interpret. The word can be found twice in Matthew, and a handful of times in Luke, but otherwise it doesn’t crop up very often. The word itself comes from another Hebrew word, *díkaios*, which is typically translated as “righteous” or “correct.”<sup>5</sup>

Given the meaning of the word, righteous or correct-acting, it is quite surprising to see it used to describe the tax collector and not the pharisee. Considering the content of each one’s prayer it seems obvious that “justified” more accurately describes the pharisee. By his own account he “acts correctly” with regards to the Law. He does all he is supposed to do, thanking God, fasting, and giving alms and likely more! And Jesus never disputes his account! Yet the pharisee goes home unjustified despite his exhibited righteousness. It’s almost as though we human beings misunderstand and misuse the Law in our attempt to “earn” salvation or righteousness. It’s almost as though God isn’t all that interested in performative faith.<sup>6</sup>

And then there’s the tax collector. Something in his prayer leads Jesus to commend him and call him justified. The final verse of our reading provides us with the necessary interpretive lens for this reversal. It seems to boil down to humility. The tax collector is humble in his prayer while something in the Pharisee is too proud. I would argue that the main difference in their attitudes stems from what I would call mirrorwork. The Pharisee is all surface and no depth. He is perfectly content to stay at the surface level, trusting (apparently incorrectly) that actions speak more than the motivations behind them. Given his prayer we can infer that the Pharisee is primarily interested in self-

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<sup>5</sup> [δίκαιος](#), adjective meaning correct, righteous, by implication innocent. Strong, James. Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> e.g. [Matthew 6:1-8](#) (NRSV)

justification and self-righteousness. He does what he does in order to be justified, and in so doing ruins any chance at justification.

The Pharisee does not thank God out of genuine gratitude, he does it so God knows he's doing it. He does not fast in order to be drawn closer to the plight of the poor, but rather as an opportunity to exhibit to God (and others) how pious he is. He gives alms not out of a desire to love and serve his neighbor, but because he believes such actions will earn God's favor and justification. The Pharisee turns all these good and kind deeds into selfish and self-serving ones.

The tax collector on the other hand, doesn't list off any actions. He doesn't even seem to have the heart to list off his sins, rather all he can say about himself is that he is a sinner in need of God's mercy. Perhaps he's not ready for that full of a confession, but at least he knows he's broken and unable to fix himself. He's honest about his state and turns to the only source he knows of for the sort of all-encompassing mercy that he needs. The prayer of the tax collector indicates that he has spent at least some time in honest reflection about who he is and how he fails to live as he was created to. He knows that acting "correctly" won't get him anywhere at this point. Honest confession is hard won through deep self-reflection.

Oddly enough the one who feels assured as to his justification remains unjustified and the one who feels as though he has no hope for justification (only mercy) ends up going home with the justification the other assumed. This is a powerful statement about the Way of Christ. It requires honest self-reflection and mirrorwork. It requires the sort of humility that is willing to view the deep self, the motivations at work within us, the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is a Way that focuses on the self only in order to be led to God for mercy and from there to neighbor for service. For it is only once we learn how we were created to live, relying on the mercy of God and centering God's love and grace in our lives, that we can live as justified children of God.

Ironically it seems as though our best hope for justification is to give up on it and simply seek to live as we were created to live. So, go home not worrying about justification or righteousness or salvation. And rather than going home carrying all those burdens, understand that you are free to go home walking the Way of Christ, for you are already justified. You are already loved, forgiven, and redeemed. Go home and live that love and grace out. Amen.