

# Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

## THE PRIMAL, ONGOING WORSHIP WAR

Luke 18:9-14

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

Luke 18:9 He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Primal Inclination of Worship

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Contrasting Worship Styles*

In this parable, Jesus contrasts two worship styles readily observed by each worshiper's demeanor and content. The first, a Pharisee, “stands alone”-some translations read “with himself” (he loved to hear himself talk?)-and gives grandiose thanks for

all his blessings. His focus is himself-his outstanding ethical behavior, what all he does for God. God is the recipient of his goodness. In fact, he makes special note of how he has exceeded expectations (two fasts, a tithe). Additionally, he exalts himself by degrading the tax collector (v. 12). The second worshiper, the tax collector, stands “far off,” can’t even look up to heaven, and beats his chest (v. 13), signs of humility, contrition and repentance. His focus is God, and as he prays, he pleads to be the recipient of God’s goodness and mercy (v. 13).

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *The Heart of the Matter*

This parable illuminates the primal worship war that goes on in everybody’s heart, whether arrogant Pharisee, arrogant disciple, or despicable tax collector, namely, the struggle between self-worship and God-worship. This basic struggle stems from the natural human proclivity for and preference of the law (*opinio legis*), which focuses on the self. Both worshipers in the parable seek a right-standing (righteousness) before God, but their approaches are completely different. The first, motivated by law, assumes that God is placated by and pleased with good actions and behavior, that “right-standing” can be earned and deserved (v. 9). This gives him the audacity to appeal to God’s justice. The second admits to a complete dearth of self-righteousness, is contrite and repentant, and appeals to God’s mercy (v. 13).

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *Humiliated, as in, Dis-Graced*

It was [and is] shocking that Jesus pronounces: “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other” (v. 14). What? Pharisees were the cream of society; tax collectors the dregs, everyone knew that. And certainly, this Pharisee, comparatively speaking, ranked much higher on the “acceptance scale.” Yet Jesus says, he is not

justified, not “righteous” (same Greek word is used in both cases), and the tax collector is justified. Why? “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (v. 14). Did he not know that the very best achievements can never stand up to God’s standard: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). How ironic! He appeals to God’s justice, and he gets justice: self-trusters who attempt “standing” before God on their own merit are severely “humbled”-not just embarrassed, but completely disgraced, as in, all grace withdrawn. You might as well say damned.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Gift of Worship**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Gift of Righteousness***

Clearly, the tax collector is acutely aware that he is doomed if he appeals to God’s justice, so he throws himself on God’s mercy. Marvelously, a soft-hearted God acquiesces-at horrific cost, and not just for the tax collector, but also for the whole world. God’s mercy materializes as a gift: a baby in a manger, his own Son. That baby, now grown up, the teller of this parable, is on his Dad’s mercy-mission: “saving” the unrighteous from damnation, pulling them out of hell, justifying them. His method is extreme, he goes to hell for the damned: he gets nailed to a cross; he is totally humiliated, executed, disgraced-damned. His Father accepts this interceding-maneuver, and in approval, retrieves him from hell (Easter).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Gift of Repentance***

On his way out of hell, Jesus holds out his hands and promises that everyone who grabs onto him (we call it faith) will get a free ride out with him-straight from abject humiliation to exaltation! This extraction involves the forgiveness of sins and

a bestowal of righteousness. But the gifting isn't over yet! Along with these gifts comes the gift of Jesus' own Holy(ing) Spirit, who, in turn, kindles repentance (another gift!) in once-arrogant, law-oozing-including disciples (including our own) hearts. Specifically, this Holy Spirit's gift of repentance "turns" hearts-which-trust-themselves towards God-who-shows-mercy-in-Christ.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Worshipping the Gift-er***

Thus the Lutheran confessors were able to say that longing for forgiveness, turning to God's mercy, is "the highest way to worship Christ" (Book of Concord, Kolb & Wengert: 144:153-54). As the gift of repentance works inside all would-be-worshippers' hearts, the urge for self-worship is stifled and genuine God-worship results. Grateful worshipers quit listening to themselves talk, quit focusing on what-all they bring to God, and instead listen to God speak to them. Their focus is on receiving and giving thanks for the cornucopia of gifts lavished on them during worship, through Word and Sacrament. Because all have been equally exalted into beloved-children-of-God status, there is no need to demean anyone, but rather mutual lifting-up, "caring and consolation" ensues.

*Addendum: Note the adjective "ongoing" in this title. That is in reference to the fact we are always at once, both the Pharisee and the tax collector and that our "worship wars" have not been settled once and for all-way back in our remote pasts, but they occur every Sunday, every day, every minute of our lives. Hence the need for the Holy Spirit's on-going gift of repentance.*