

“THIS Man Went Home Justified!”

Luke 18:9-14

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT!” Sound familiar? A teacher has heard a student say that. A supervisor has heard it an employee say that. A parent has heard a child say that. And what always follows that statement: attempts to justify themselves by making excuses for what they did. People try to shift the blame and get out of whatever consequences might be coming. **Adam** blamed both Eve & God at the same time... **you know God that** *“woman you put here with me...”* **Eve** tried the same tactic... *“the serpent deceived me...”* They both tried to **JUSTIFY** themselves.

It’s kind of ironic, isn’t it ~ that we use that word for that. **Justify** is one of the most important words in the Bible. Theologically, it means that God declares us not guilty in his courtroom even though every sinner stands before Him without any excuses. But when we use it in everyday speech, it usually means that we make an excuse.

That huge difference illustrates part of the irony which our Lenten devotions will present in 2016. What’s irony? Webster defines irony as *“a situation that is strange because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you’d expect.”* Jesus’ passion story is filled with all kinds of irony. Today, we begin our Lenten journey by looking at **THE IRONIES OF THE PASSION**. What is ironic in this story is that...

“THIS Man Went Home Justified!”

Now, maybe this parable doesn’t seem all that ironic to us. But Jesus wants his hearers to know that **the man** who did **not** try to follow God’s laws **went home justified**, instead of the man who did try. And there’s good reason for that.

1

Jesus told this parable to people **who were confident of their own righteousness and who looked down on everyone else**, people **who trusted** in themselves, **confided** in their own righteousness and despised every one else not like them.

TWO MEN WENT UP TO THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM TO PRAY. ONE WAS A PHARISEE AND THE OTHER A TAX COLLECTOR. Let’s look at the Pharisee first. He stood up (though that was customary, there was more behind this) and he prayed **“about himself”**: **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.** Sound like a good prayer to you? The audience Jesus was speaking to thought they were righteous, so Jesus’ parable couldn’t be attacking them. His story sounded pretty good so far - about a good, ole, real-down-to-earth Pharisee **that only a mother could love!!!!**

One of the ironies of this parable is the reaction to the word **Pharisee**. To us, that word means proud and self-righteous. We can’t imagine a Pharisee as anything other than a hypocrite. But to the 1st century Jew, **Pharisee** meant the people who defended a strict interpretation of the Old Testament law. They held that it really was the true Word of God. 1

When this Pharisee said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer—that was true. He didn’t break into people’s houses & rob people. He didn’t shoplift anything. He didn’t run around with other women. He had a clean record – not so much as a parking ticket.

So compared to a tax-collector, there was a huge difference. Jews perceived tax collectors as **double-crossers**. Some of their own worked for the Romans, by collecting taxes from their own people. The Romans permitted tax collectors to collect way more than the government required and then pocket the difference. To a Jew, tax collectors were as crooked as a winding road up a mountain.

Back to the Pharisee – he wasn’t like all those crooks. He gave 10% of what he acquired to the Lord, just like the Old Testament tithing laws commanded. He fasted twice a week even though Mosaic law commanded only one fast per year on the Day of Atonement. This man was full of himself basking in his own outward show of letting everyone know he was much holier than others.

So what’s the sin? It was the pride of his heart. This man was sinfully confident of his own righteousness. He thought he earned points with God by what he did. He thought that he was at the top God’s record book. **“God, I thank you for me being me.”** Compared to others - If there was a **“HALL OF FAME”** for pride and arrogance, he would be shoo-ins on the 1st ballot! On top of that, he looked down on everyone else who didn’t match up to his “goodness”. As much as this Pharisee thought he was justified by trying to follow God’s laws, **he could not go home justified before God** because he remained guilty as sin!

Could we ever be as confident of our own righteousness as this Pharisee? We’d never admit it, but have we ever echoed this man’s prayer? **“I thank you, God, that we in our church/Synod are not like other churches.”** **We maintain purity of doctrine & practice. We’re not like the Catholics or the Methodists or the liberal Lutheran churches.”** Or make it a little more personal: **“I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other people who abuse their wives or kids. I don’t use drugs or alcohol. I stay out of trouble. And look what I do for my church—president of the council or WINGS, MEN’S CLUB, or LWMS. I’ve played bells, sung in choir, taught in VBS, and cleaned the church. I shoot for 8-10% of my income to the church. I never miss a Lenten service, and I even help clean up at a couple of the Lenten suppers.”**

What's wrong with that prayer? Doesn't God command us to keep his doctrine pure and to stand on the truth? Doesn't He expect us to love our spouses and children? Doesn't He call on us to support the work of the church with our offerings, our time, and our talents? So what is the problem?

The same problem this Pharisee had—**pride**. If we think we're righteous before God because we came to this Lenten service, if we are patting ourselves on the back for all we do, if we ignore the areas of our hearts and lives where we sin and tell ourselves that we're better Christians than others, then we have done nothing that God considers righteous because we've not done all this out of love for our Savior, Jesus. **We are still, unjustified sinners** whose best efforts are still corrupt and **are nothing more than filthy rags in God's sight**. And we are no more "justified" than the Pharisee **who tried to keep God's laws**.

2

The irony in this parable is that the man who thought he followed God's laws failed to grasp the meaning of true, humble repentance. But the man who lived a sinful life understood what it meant to repent, and he threw himself on God's mercy. **This man, (who humbled himself before God), went home justified.**

The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast (sign of mourning/grief) and said, **"GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME, A SINNER."** He understood that he had no defense in God's courtroom. This tax collector didn't lie to himself about his righteousness. He understood that the only verdict God's court could possibly render **was guilty**. So he leaned on God's mercy, on God's answer to sin: **THE SACRIFICE OF HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST**. **This man, who humbled himself before God, went home justified rather than the other who thought he kept God's laws.**

Jesus is the only reason God accepts our efforts. Today we embark on that Lenten journey once more to review why. Jesus died and paid for the sin in our hearts that contaminates every effort we ever make to serve God. Jesus died and paid for the pride and sin that cuts us off from God. His sufferings and death on the cross erase all of God's evidence of our sin. He reminds us that he washed our sins away in Baptism. He gives us his forgiveness in Holy Communion. The evidence of our sins is erased, deleted, wiped away. **God declares us righteous** in the Gospel—[**justified**, to use the biblical term] because of what Jesus did for us. Paul says: **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. (Rom 8:1) **"Take heart, son/daughter; your sins are forgiven."** (Matt 9:2)

There is no justifiable reason to pray, **"I thank you, God, that I'm not like other people."** There are all sorts of justifiable reasons to humbly say: **"I thank you, God, that you don't give me what I deserve. You know me better than I know me. I thank you, God, that you have had mercy on me. I thank you, Lord that you declared me not guilty, justified** because of the merits of your Son, Jesus.

Irony is written all over the gospel and we will explore it much more thoroughly during this Lenten season. There's one **IRONY OF THE PASSION** right here in this first story. If you want to be justified before God, then admit your guilt, not your goodness and plead for his mercy, not your own merits. Simply trust his love **and go home today justified**. **That's an outcome that seems to be the opposite of what you'd expect**. But that's the irony – of God's grace! **Amen**.