

# The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

August 23, 2020

St. Luke 18.9-14

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Come on, you can do better than that! After I say my part, you say *Amen*. Let's try it again, and this time say it like you mean it. "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ...*"

Liturgy is dialogue. It's a dialogue between me and you, pastor and people, which is really to say, it's a dialogue between the Lord and His baptized people.

The "Amen" is yours. When you say it, you are saying, "Yes! What the pastor said is true. I say "Yes!" to God's Word, "Yes" to God's blessing, "Yes" to God's gifts. I believe it; yea, yea, it shall be so."

My son is non-verbal. There are lots of words I'd like him to say, but if I could only choose one, it would be "Amen." That's what faith says. Faith says "amen" to the Words and promises of God. "Amen" is your "yes" to God's grace. "Amen" is your "yes" to God's *justification*.

"Justification" is the key word in today's Gospel reading. "Justification" is the central teaching of Christianity. The tax collector in today's parable "**went down to his house justified.**" To say he's "justified" means he's **righteous** in God's eyes. There are **two kinds of righteousness** – righteousness by works, and righteousness by faith. The Pharisee thought he was justified, or righteous, by works, because of who he was and what he had done. "**God, I thank You that I am not like other men— extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.**" You can see where is trust is: in himself. That's righteousness by works. The Tax Collector, however, has nothing to give, nothing to offer, no means of justification within himself. He's not righteous, and he knows it. So he casts himself at the mercy of the One who is righteous, saying, "**God, be merciful to me a sinner!**" Jesus says, "That's the one who goes home really righteous, truly justified." His faith is not in himself, but in God's mercy.

God demands righteousness. He threatens to judge all who break His Law. Every uncharitable word, each impure thought, one angry glare brings us under God's judgment of death.

There is no successful presentation of our case before God. There's only one thing to do: repent, and say the prayer of the publican: **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."**

It sounds easy, but it hurts your pride to admit that. It's in our nature to want some credit for ourselves. That's why throughout the ages a popular corruption of Christianity has been to combine works and mercy. "I'll do my bit, and Jesus will do His. We'll make a great team." The fancy word for this is Pelagianism. You'll find it everywhere, from Rome to the local non-denominational church. Faith itself often becomes a work, an interior quality that pleases God.

That's not what faith is. Faith merely apprehends and rejoices in what God gives, does, says. Whenever you feel you need to add to what Jesus does, you're really saying that what Jesus does isn't enough. That's why I made the big deal about the "Amen." "Amen" says, "Mission accomplished. Works done. Gift received." Faith says "amen" to the completed works of Jesus.

A woman once came to Luther in great distress because she was convinced she didn't have enough faith. He asked her to recite the explanation to the Second Article of the Creed in the *Small Catechism*: *"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature."* At that point he asked her, "Do you believe that?" "Of course," she said. That's faith: I'm a lost and condemned creature, but Jesus Christ has redeemed me. You see, your justification doesn't depend on how you're feeling or what you're experiencing in the moment. Your justification is outside of you, in what Jesus did.

Justification does to us the opposite of what happened to Jesus. Consider Christ on the cross. Is He a sinner, or not? According to His Person, no. He is righteous. But the Father declares Him “sinner,” putting on Him all our sins. Us on the other hand, we’re sinners. But because of the death of Jesus, God declares us sinners “righteous.”

Good Lutheran theology uses the term “the righteousness of faith.” That doesn’t mean it’s your that generates the righteousness; it’s faith that apprehends the righteousness, like the bucket or bowl into which the popcorn is put. Faith says, “When I look at myself, I see an idolatrous murderer, adulterer, liar. But when I look at Christ, I see that God has been merciful to me, a sinner; in Him I am righteous.”

That’s for everyone. So why aren’t all men saved? Because many say, “I don’t want it. I am autonomous, a law unto myself.” God is love, but man rejects the love of God in Christ Jesus, embracing instead self-love.

So what does this mean for your life now? If the Pharisee understood justification, he would not condemn the tax collector; rather, he would see one who, like himself, stands in need of God’s mercy. If *you* understand justification, you won’t quarrel with your spouse, poke fun at your neighbor, gossip about family and co-workers, because you see in these people what you see in yourself – a sinner for whom Christ died.

Think about another tax collector in the Bible, Zacchaeus. He was a real tax collector, not just a character in a parable. When he repented and believed the gospel, he also gave up his former manner of life, restoring what he stole. That is the fruit of faith, like we heard about a couple of weeks ago.

So this week, why don’t you make the tax collector’s prayer your own, every morning and evening: “**God, be merciful to me, a sinner.**” And today, you go home justified, forgiven, a saint. ✠INJ✠

*The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts in Christ Jesus.*