

Luke 18:9-17

The Word of the Lord from Luke 18:17: "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

I. Hoc est verum. Wir sind alle Bettler

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When Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, a scrap of paper was found in his pocket with his final seven words, a mix of Latin and German. Hoc est verum. Wir sind alle Bettler—"This is true: we are all beggars."

Elsewhere, Luther had written that before God, we are beggars with empty sacks. We have nothing for ourselves—everything is a gift from God. This is especially true when it comes to righteousness: it's not just that we're generally good people who need a little more righteousness to put us over the top, but that we're by nature unrighteous, unholy, sinful and enemies of God. We've got nothing that merits God's help—by nature, we've got all sorts of sin that deserves His judgment. So when it comes to God's grace and mercy and help, we're beggars with empty sacks. We've got nothing to show, nothing to give in order to make God give us even the time of day.

But for Jesus' sake, God fills up our empty sacks. He fills us full of grace and faith, life and salvation. Fills to overflowing. It is undeserved. It is all because Christ has died in our place, suffering the condemnation for our sin. Apart from Christ, you're the prodigal son—hungry, poor and sitting among the pigs. But because of Christ, you're in the Father's household, seated at His banquet feast and wrapped in the finest robe of righteousness—Jesus' righteousness.

It's always undeserved: it's not like, once we're baptized, we grow to be more and more righteous on our own until we don't need to borrow Jesus' holiness anymore. We're always in need of grace. In that sense, we're always beggars. This is true.

Our Lord teaches this truth by way of a parable in our Gospel lesson for today, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. But as you meditate on this text, keep in mind that beggars don't always look or feel like beggars.

Traditionally, we hear the Pharisee's prayer as boastful, especially since Jesus tells the parable against those who treat others with contempt. We hear, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this (ewww) tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." He may sound pompous: he may blatantly be boasting before God and saying, "You've got to love me more than this tax collector because I'm better than he is." But, he may also sound earnest and sincere: "God, I'm working hard at pleasing you. It isn't easy—it's tough to keep Your laws! Deep down inside, I'd rather charge a little extra for my services than tithe on the things that I buy. I'd rather look out for my own interests than be completely fair with other people. It's not easy to think on holy things when my eyes would rather lust and my mind think adulterous thoughts. It's tough to fast twice a week because I'd rather be a glutton. Sometimes I envy those tax collectors who just do what they do and don't worry. But it's wrong—I know that it's wrong, and so I thank you that I'm not like that. I don't want to be like him. I'm working on it, Lord."

That's not a pompous-sounding prayer. That's the prayer of somebody who's struggling with sin, who's trying to do the right thing, trying to keep the Law. You can probably identify with the temptations he's talking about, with the struggle he's having. This is a good guy. I wouldn't mind having him live next door: better him than a guy who works for the revenue service.

But either way, the Pharisee's prayer is wrong—it's just that the error is far more subtle in one case than the other. It's easy to spot sin when it's obnoxious. If the Pharisee's prayer is "God, you've got to love me more than this tax collector because I'm better than him," the sin is obvious. We say, "He's not better than the tax collector. He's sinful, too. He's not saved by his works of fasting and tithing because no one is saved by works; and he shows his pride and his lack of love by how poorly he regards the tax collector. He's not sorry at all for who he is—that's his sin. That's why he doesn't go home justified."

That's pretty clear when the arrogance is so obnoxiously arrogant. But what if the Pharisee's prayer is the one of the earnest, sincere guy who wants to do the right thing, who struggles with temptation and works hard to be righteous? What if it's the good-guy-neighbor next door who's working hard to set a good example of what it is to be a follower of God? The answer is that he still doesn't go home justified. Why? Because as sincere and

earnest as he is, he still believes that he is earning God's love by trying hard to do the right thing. He still believes that he's working his way from being a beggar to being somebody who deserves God's respect. He might be a nice guy and great neighbor, but he's still an unjustified neighbor going to hell.

Whether the prayer sounds boastful or earnest, it treats others with contempt. Blatantly or subtly, it says, "God loves me more because of what I'm doing, or at least what I'm trying to do." Worse, though, it treats Christ with contempt. It says, "I may have needed a lot of forgiveness at the beginning, but I need less and less of Jesus' righteousness because I'm getting better by myself."

The tax collector in the parable has no such assumptions about himself. He's convicted of the truth that he's got nothing at all to make Holy God help him out. He knows he's a beggar with the empty sack. He stands far off, unworthy to be close to a righteous God. He doesn't even lift his eyes to heaven, but prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" It's a great, God-pleasing prayer of faith. Of himself, the tax collector says, "Here's the sum total of who I am: I'm a sinner. There is nothing about me that deserves your help." Of God, the tax collector says, "Although You are righteous, You are also merciful; and so I ask that You would be merciful to me." What a prayer of faith! The tax collector says, "I'm a beggar who's got nothing and deserves nothing. So don't help me because of who I am—help me because of who You are, God, because You are merciful."

He's the one who goes home justified, because he's the one who trusts in God's undeserved mercy. Bear in mind: the Pharisee may still be the better neighbor by far, but the tax collector is the one forgiven.

Jesus concludes, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." No matter the Pharisee's tone and sincerity, he exalts himself, (even if he is working hard at being humble!)"—"Lord, I expect Your help because of who I am." It's the tax collector who speaks the truth, the very humble truth: "I'm a beggar with an empty sack. The only reason for You to help me is because of who You are. And because You are merciful, I trust You will be merciful to me."

II. From Virtue to Grace

There's a quote worth pondering from a theologian named Gerhard Forde. Forde said, "Christianity is not a movement from vice to virtue. It is a movement from virtue to grace."

Christianity is not a movement from vice to virtue. It is not about becoming better people. Let's be clear: it is good to forsake vice and embrace virtue. It is far better to seek to keep God's Law than it is

to throw up your hands and surrender to depravity. It isn't easy: virtue comes hard in a world that seeks to defile you in every way possible. But virtue is still a worthy pursuit.

However, the movement of vice to virtue is not what Christianity is about at its core. Moving from vice to virtue is all about your effort, your work. Instead, Christianity is a movement from virtue to grace. This is not your work, for only the Holy Spirit moves us from trusting in our virtue and trusting in God's grace in Christ. It is the faith that you are not saved by your virtue, but solely for the sake of Jesus. That's amply demonstrated by the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee was virtuous—but he wasn't repentant.

As Christians, then, we preach Christ and Him crucified. With the apostles, we preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins, not self-help or spiritual exercises. We proclaim the Law to condemn sin and point to Christ, not the Law as a way to become a better person. We preach Jesus as your Savior from sin, not as an example for you to live up to. We preach away from self-righteousness and proclaim Jesus' righteousness for you. We confess that we are beggars, but that we are saved because Christ shares His riches with us and makes us heirs of the kingdom of God.

We treasure this proclamation, and we guard against teachings that would change it, for the idea that Christianity is principally about moving from vice to virtue is a big theme in many churches today. We are often reminded that a famous evangelist supposedly remarked that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is a sleeping giant, apparently meaning that we have the Gospel, but we need to wake up because we just don't do a good job of putting it into practice. I, for one, have been clubbed over the head with this multiple times at various conferences and conventions. But before we confess our sin of sleepiness, let's examine who's calling us to repentance. As we've talked about in our Adult Bible Class this fall, much of American Christianity is seriously influenced by pietism; and pietism teaches that Christianity is mostly about living a moral life, sometimes called "Christian living" or "living the Gospel." Pietism says that forgiveness is important to get you started, but then your life as a Christian is about getting better, moving from vice to virtue. If that's what you believe, then Lutherans will appear sleepy because they keep going back to step one—forgiveness, but they never move on

to moral development, to "Christian living," to putting the Gospel into practice. But, dear friends, Christianity is not about moving from vice to virtue, but moving from virtue to grace. It's about repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Putting the Gospel into practice isn't about preaching a moral life: practicing the Gospel is ongoing proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, so that you go home justified. So where we are accused of being a sleeping giant for our continual return to the cross, to Christ and forgiveness, we don't hang our heads in shame. We have no reason to repent of fake sins.

We have no time for fake sins because there are plenty of real sins to repent of. As we guard against Pharisees and pietists on the outside who try to move us from the Gospel, we need all the more to guard against ourselves.

There's a Pharisee inside of each of us. By nature, you're tempted to believe that God loves you because of something about you. Sometimes, it's a matter of silly pride that infects all sorts of gifts of God. If you're attractive, you're happy that you're better looking than others. If you're smart, you're happy that you're smarter than others. If you're a hard worker, you're happy that you're not a slacker like too many today. If you're talented, you're happy that you're not like those who have little to attract attention. That is simply how the sinful nature makes you think: you measure yourself by how you're better than others. You find your worth in what you've got that others don't. It can be a subtle form of contempt, but it is contempt all the same. And if that is how you think, then that is how you present yourself to God: "God, I'm happy that I'm not like those other people." And there you go, sounding just like the Pharisee. But the truth is this: standing before God is a great leveler. No matter the amount of giftedness, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Your worth, your value before God does not come from who you are: if you want proof, then keep in mind that all sorts of beautiful, smart, talented

people are going to hell. Your worth before God comes from the truth that you have been bought by the blood of Christ, crucified and raised for you.

In other words, your worth before God does not come from your virtue. Your worth is a matter of grace—the grace given you for the sake of Jesus.

There's a pietist inside of each of us too, that says that being a Christian is all about becoming better and better, that it's all about improving one's life and morals. God grant that we Christians constantly strive at keeping His Law as best we can, but that is not what Christian life is. Christian life is the life of Christ given for you, to you: it is given in the preaching of His Word, in the waters of Holy Baptism. It is given to you as Christ's body and blood with bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Do not measure your life as a Christian by what you do, but by the life that Christ gives to you. Do not forsake the means of grace and think you should move past them to be a better Christian, for that is the equivalent of forsaking food and oxygen in order to really live. That too is contempt: contempt for Jesus.

Of course, your sinful nature has all sorts of tricks: you may well be tempted to say, "In order to prove that I'm not a pietist, in order to prove that I don't trust in my virtue, I will do my best to avoid virtue as much as possible. I don't mean that I'll turn to vice, but I'll be quite happy not to serve. Let other people do and serve and give and spend time helping out instead of me." That's a thin veil to hide contempt that says, "My time and resources are worth more than that of others." In other words, "I'm thankful that I'm not like them." Sounds like one of the characters in the parable, yes?

Such thinking is not for you—for by the grace of God you know that you are beggars with empty sacks, filled up with grace and life for the sake of Jesus. Or, as Jesus says following the parable, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Little children—the word here even includes babies—don't bargain or ask if strings are attached. They don't ask what they have to do for milk or formula or food: they simply trust, expect, that their parents will give them what they need. It is the same for the children of God: we receive God's grace and life, rejoicing that there are no strings attached. Apart from Christ, we are all beggars with nothing. But by His grace, Christ gives us all things. He is merciful to you; and for His sake, the kingdom of heaven is yours. He justifies you. You're no longer a beggar, but a child of God in the household of the King: for you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen