

Encounter with Myself

A Service for School Beginners

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Trinity — Luke 18:9–14



9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He

would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ 14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

(NIV)

Dear children, dear congregation,

our sermon text tells of two men who pray in very different ways. Before we get to them, I want to begin with a thought that many of you already know.

Some people have it good in life: they are healthy, they can learn, find a good job, provide for their family, and save for old age. When life goes well for a long time, they can say in the end: “Thank you, God, that everything turned out so well!” Just as Psalm 139 says: “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14, NIV).

But even people who are doing well sometimes reach their limits. Let me tell you a story about that: A man had worked hard for thirty-five years. He had risen to the very top of his company. He was clever and diligent, and he had also had a bit of luck. Then a great crisis came. The company had to make cutbacks. He himself had to lay off many good employees, sometimes with tears in his eyes. And then he realized: now his own position was at stake too. A great fear gripped him — the fear of losing everything. This fear would not let go of him, day or night. And one night he did something he had not done in a long time: he prayed and asked God for help. Shortly afterward, the good news came: two companies were merging, and his job was saved. Then the man thought to himself, “Well, that turned out fine. God helps those who help themselves.” In doing so, he had completely forgotten that he had just asked God for help!

Dear children, a new school year is beginning for you now. How do you feel about that? How do those of you who are coming to school for the very first time feel? Are you excited? Or are you also a little afraid of everything that lies ahead of you? By the way, this question about new beginnings is not only important for you children. We adults, too, are constantly

facing new tasks and don't always know for certain whether we'll manage them. Some things even seem quite difficult to us. Perhaps that's exactly how it is for you right now: a challenge lies ahead of you, and you don't know how it will turn out. You don't even know whether you have the strength for it. Some people even find themselves stuck in a situation from which they can see no way out on their own. Here is what matters to me: when we face a new beginning, we like to think about how we'll handle success. But we should also think about how we handle failure — because both belong to life.

In our Bible text, Jesus tells a story about two men to address just this. One is successful, the other is not at all. Both stand before God at the same time, and Jesus lets us look into their hearts. The heart is the place within us where our feelings live and where we consider what we want to do. Normally, no one can see what is going on in another person's heart. Only you yourself know what you are thinking in your heart. But today Jesus shows us exactly that: the hearts of two very different men.

A Pharisee and a tax collector. The two could hardly have been more different. In those days, the Pharisees were highly respected people. The word “Pharisee” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to separate oneself” and was closely related to the word for “to be holy.” The Pharisees kept themselves far from anything unclean or sinful. And they did even more than the commandments required of them: giving more, fasting more, doing more good works than anyone else. So they would have had every reason to thank God for making them so wonderfully and for enabling them to do so much good. Many people admired them and wanted to be just like them.

But Jesus, as I said, lets us look into this Pharisee's heart. And there, things look quite different from what one might expect. In the eyes of the people, he was held in high regard, and everyone assumed he was the same in God's eyes. Yet in his prayer, this Pharisee wasn't really thinking about God at all. He stayed focused on himself. In truth, he didn't need God at all. Nothing was missing in his life. He didn't need a God who would take him in his arms and say, “I love you just as you are — with all your flaws.” Nor did he need a God to tell him, “You are good!” Instead, he had already declared himself good. But his gaze didn't stop with himself. He also looked down — at the tax collector standing there. That was a man everyone considered a nasty cheat. When the Pharisee saw him, he immediately felt even better and thanked God that he was not like him. Yet in truth he hadn't really thanked God at all, because he didn't actually have God in view. He had simply praised himself for being such a good person.

In this way, Jesus exposes the heart of this Pharisee. He shows us that this prayer is not really directed at God at all — the man is actually only talking to himself. He believes in himself, not in God. Jesus deliberately paints the Pharisee in a somewhat exaggerated way, because he knows the human heart very well. And this kind of heart still exists today. We recognize such thoughts from our own lives too. Who doesn't know this feeling: you compare yourself to others and immediately feel better when someone gets a worse grade than you did. You know this too, don't you? “Mom, Dad, I was among the top five in my class!” Comparing ourselves to others and coming out ahead feels good — at least for a moment. Some people then say, “There is so much evil in the world. But I have never hurt a person or an animal.” Looking down on others makes us feel better and helps us overlook our own mistakes. Sometimes this kind of looking down on others can even turn into contempt or hatred. That still happens today too — for example, online, when people are put down because of their origin, their culture, or their opinions. Badmouthing others almost always has the same effect: for a moment, you feel better about yourself.

Jesus contrasts this prayer of the Pharisee with the prayer of the tax collector. A greater contrast would hardly have been possible. Tax collectors had to collect taxes. To do this, they went into people's homes — often unfriendly, sometimes deceitful — trying to extract as much money as possible. When someone came into town, everything they carried was counted: one person had to hand over a sack of flour, another his beloved goat or donkey, yet another an entire sack full of gold. No wonder people didn't like these tax collectors. A Roman who lived at that time even reports thirty-nine different insulting names for a tax collector. And it was just such a man who, like the Pharisee, came to the house of God to pray. But he stood far at the back. He didn't even dare to look up toward heaven. He knew exactly what he had done wrong. He knew only this one prayer, from Psalm 51: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

We know this prayer too — we prayed it ourselves today. Do you remember? Who knows what this prayer, “Lord, have mercy,” is also called? — That's right: Kyrie eleison! The tax collector's prayer was exactly that: short, but honest. He truly felt separated from God and wanted with all his heart to belong to him again. He wanted everything to be made right again, but he didn't know how that could happen — he didn't know the way to God. But one thing mattered: he really spoke with God. He told him all his distress and hopelessness, and as he did, he beat his breast.

The heart is the place where we think and where we quietly make our plans. And this is exactly the heart that the tax collector now opened before God. He told God everything that was wrong and heavy within him, and asked for nothing more than mercy — that God would be good to him. Praying the way this tax collector prayed is often hard for us. Admitting a mistake is not easy. We would rather look for excuses. Usually we find some excuse we can live with, and we hide our mistakes from others. That's why we don't like to talk about our guilt either. Is there a place where we can do this anyway — without fear?

Jesus tells us this story because he wants to speak to our heart. Where do I find myself in it? Which heart do I have — the heart of the Pharisee or the heart of the tax collector? What do I think about God? What do I think about myself? What do I think about the future, especially right now, at the start of this new school year? Jesus wants us to see God, ourselves, and the people around us in a new way. Are you sometimes like the Pharisee, truly proud of what you have achieved? Or are you sometimes like the tax collector, sad about what didn't go well? Sometimes it's hard to tell the two apart within ourselves. It can even happen that I first feel genuinely sad about my mistakes — and then proud that I'm not as proud as a Pharisee! When it comes to our hearts, we keep running up against our limits. We cannot simply change our own hearts however we like.

And that brings us to the most important question: What does God think about all this? Jesus shows us: more than anything, God wants to forgive. God wants to be merciful. And he loves it so much that he is even merciful to the tax collector. The Pharisee doesn't really need this God, because he is enough for himself. But he too can change.

The writer C. S. Lewis, in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, tells the story of a boy named Eustace. Eustace always wants to be better than everyone else, and this makes life hard for those around him. One day his greed leads him into a dragon's cave, where he finds a treasure. He grabs for it and is himself transformed into an ugly dragon. Eustace suffers under his dragon skin and wants to be rid of it, but he cannot manage it on his own. Then he meets the great lion Aslan. Only Aslan can peel the dragon skin away from him. Slowly, sometimes painfully, Aslan frees him from it — and Eustace becomes a new, kind person.

What C. S. Lewis wants to say is this: Jesus is like this lion. Only he can free us from our own “dragon skin.” We cannot do it by our own strength.

Every encounter with another person — whether they believe in Jesus or not — is a gift from God. In that encounter, I notice that I myself need something. And I notice that the other person needs something too. That's why there is always reason to pray: Lord, have mercy! And there is always reason to give thanks: Thank you, Jesus, that you exist. Without you, it doesn't work.

Amen.