

There were two men who went up into the Temple, who approached God's altar to pray. The scene is this: the evening sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. There is a Divine Service with a liturgy, a lectionary of assigned readings to be read from Scriptures, preaching, and Psalms to be sung. Then, at the appointed time, the priests take the lamb and sacrifice it on the altar in the inner courtyard outside the Holy Place of the Temple. At the time of the sacrifice, the priest would go into the Holy Place and burn incense at the altar of incense just short of the curtain separating him from the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant.

Thus, it was a time for the assembled congregation to pray to God. They normally offered up thanks to God for his gracious gifts — for forgiving their sins and the sins of the people through this sacrifice that pointed forward to the Messiah to come. When the priest was done, the sacrifice complete, he would return to the steps above the courtyard to the assembled congregation and give the Aaronic Benediction. But Jesus tells us about two unique prayers at this particular Divine Service during the sacrifice.

“O God, I thank you that I am not like these other men, thieves, unrighteous, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I am fasting twice around each Sabbath, I am tithing all that I acquire.” (Luke 18:11–12) Maybe the Pharisee's name was Cain. He certainly prayed the prayer of Cain. Look at me, self-righteous, self-made man that I am! I have fasted twice each week, because I assume my fellow men are failing to fast even once per week. I tithe not just what I earn in income. I even tithe that which I buy from the markets, because I think the people who sold it never give a tithe of what they make on what they sell. So I am tithing to make up for those who do not. My gift of prayer, of being present here today, should be good enough, O God, simply because I am a righteous son of Israel, I am better than all my brothers. I'm not like this worthless tax collector who steals for a living.

The Pharisee separates himself from all the others, puts himself in the position of the priest, and leads others in a prayer that engenders no thanks to God for His manifold blessings. Rather, he teaches others to rely on themselves for their righteousness, to trust and believe in their own works and status to make themselves righteous and holy before God. The Pharisee was ignoring the very Divine Service that was going on around him. It was as if the sacrifice of the lamb and the incense, the ritual purity in sight, smell, and sound that God was providing as a gift was not enough.

Why was this Divine Service not enough for the Pharisee? Why was it not enough for Cain? Why did he think he could get by with an offering of his choosing, to do as he pleased? Because they did not believe that sin had mastery over them. They did not believe they were sinners in need of a Savior. They did not think they needed God's promised Messiah, the fulfillment and completion of these ritual sacrifices, whose ultimate sacrifice would make those sacrifices valid, whose sacrifice would make these men valid before God, righteous, justified, not guilty of sins. They did not want the free gift of God's grace and mercy; they did not have the humble, childlike faith that receives God's gifts. Instead, they both believed in themselves. They did not really believe themselves to be sinners. They considered themselves to be their own messiah. They were not looking for atonement from God; they were looking to atone for themselves; trusting and believing and listening to the voice within, the preaching of the Devil. You act good enough, you have the right attitude, you believe in yourself and what you can accomplish, you can be the person God intends for you to be, the false preachers of this age preach.

We have a lot of modern Pharisees out there preaching that way. It's because that is what our itching, sinful ears want to hear — how we can save ourselves. So many today are promoting a theology of self-made righteousness, that we can earn our own forgiveness from God by the decisions and choices we make.

This downplays both original sin and our ongoing daily sinfulness. So they also despise the Means of Grace, the preaching of the Gospel, the Absolution freely spoken in Christ's Name, the Sacrament of Baptism to wash away sins and make one a child of God, the Sacrament of the Altar where Jesus feeds us with His own sacrificed Body and Blood to

forgive and strengthen us unto eternal life. God's actions and gifts towards us do not matter to these Pharisees, only our own actions.

And, note this well: since they despise the grace and mercy of God, they, therefore, show little or no mercy to those around them who do not meet their standards of piety and devotion. There again, we should all admit, as sinners, that in this Pharisee and his preaching of a self-righteous, do-it-yourself religion, and in his lack of mercy towards others, we can see ourselves.

But there were two men who went up into the Temple for Divine Service and approached the altar of God to pray.

“O God, make atonement for me, the sinner.” (Luke 18:13) Maybe the tax collector's name was Abel. He certainly prayed the prayer of Abel. Abel brought the firstborn lamb, the best of the flock, as the sacrifice for sin to God. It was a sign of our ultimate humiliation as sinners before God. We are not worthy of the first of the flock. Only God is worthy of this firstborn lamb. Also, a shepherd tending a flock can do nothing to cause a new lamb to be conceived and born. The lamb simply arrives, and the believer simply brings the lamb back to God for the sacrifice.

The tax collector, like Abel, had nothing to show for his labor in sin's fields. He only had the firstborn lamb that the priest that evening was sacrificing on his behalf. He only had a broken and contrite heart. He believed that God would not despise these. He had faith that God does not desire the death of the sinner. Like Abel, He would rely on the firstborn Lamb that would be sacrificed. So he did what he could only do: he humbled himself and so confessed that he had no standing on his own before God. He knew he was so sinful, he could not even desire one ounce to even lift his eyes up towards heaven. He continually beat his breast in sorrow and contrition and prayed.

When we see the Lamb slain for our offenses, there is mercy, there is comfort, there is the hope and promise of resurrection there, because God is acting on our behalf.

“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4–6)

Abel, the tax collector, all the ones who rely on the mercy of God, who rely on the sacrifice of the firstborn Lamb of God, they are the ones who go home justified before God, who are exalted before God and raised up with Christ in the heavenly places. The Lamb of God, the one who humbled Himself even to the point of death on the cross, who sacrificed Himself, who received on our behalf the beating and the gruesome punishment that we truly deserved, who takes away the sins of the world, He is the humble one who exalts us. He is the mercy that the sinner prays to the Heavenly Father for. Jesus Christ is God's rich mercy, His great love that saves us and atones for our sins. Jesus is the mercy from God that rescues us from needing to depend upon ourselves.

Jesus humbled Himself, to the point of taking upon Himself our sinful flesh, dying on the cross, and lying in the tomb until the third day, so that He would be exalted in resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. In His resurrection and ascension, we find our true and lasting exaltation for our frail flesh. Our exalted self-righteousness is humbled, and in its place rises the exalted humility of our Lord Jesus' flesh and blood. This must be so — or else Jesus could not go on to say, “Let the children come unto me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:16) The Kingdom belongs to them, and to you. The children, even the smallest infants, have faith by the power of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit to receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through the blood of the Lamb in the holy waters of Baptism. When the Christian is humble by faith to be washed of their sins, then the Christian is truly exalted in Heaven. The angels rejoice over the one sinner, each lost little lamb, who has humbly been brought safely into the fold of the Good Shepherd.

Here, He lavishes upon grace upon grace, forgiveness that He has won for us on us so that we can go from His House down to our houses, to where we live as families, to where we toil in our vocations, to wherever our Lord leads us in this lifetime, even, in the tough and hard times of our lives, as people who are justified before God, free of the need and the burden of proving ourselves before God and others.

We are free instead to respond in praise and thanks to God with our prayer and praise and the right confession of the faith in which we stand. We are free instead to reflect the mercy of God in Christ to our families, our neighbors, to the world, to all who are in need of that mercy, by being faithful in the daily vocations God gives us as parents, children, workers, or students. We are free to reflect that mercy by supporting the ongoing work of the Church here and around the world in acts of mercy, in the missionary preaching of the Gospel, and the teaching of the Gospel to our dear lambs in our Lutheran School.

Looking for atonement and mercy, like the tax collector, dear fellow sinners? There is good news that you and I and this world need to hear: behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. No matter how low we have gone in life, no matter how sinful and shameful we have acted, even if we have stolen with the worst tax collectors and thieves of the world, even if we have been the worst of the unrighteous and adulterers, the Divine Service of God, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is for you, to deliver you, dear child, the kingdom of God.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.