

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity; Luke 18:8-14

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil.

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

1. Here again we have a picture and an example of the divine judgment on saints and good people. Two extraordinary persons are presented to us in this Gospel; one thoroughly good and truly pious; and one hypocritically pious. But before we take up the example and consider the terrible sentence, we must first notice that Luke here makes the impression as though righteousness came by works. For Luke is most accustomed to do this, as when we at present preach that faith alone saves, he observes that people are led to desire only to believe, and to neglect the power and fruit of faith. This John also does in his Epistle and James, where they show that faith cannot exist without works. Thus Luke, in the beginning of his introduction, would speak as follows: I see indeed that many have preached how faith alone saves, by which they have brought the people to strive for a fictitious faith; hence I must also speak of works by which they can be assured of their faith, and prove it to the people by their acts. Consequently it sounds as though Luke everywhere taught that righteousness came by works; as you have recently heard: Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven; and, make unto yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness. And here it appears as though the publican had obtained his goodness by praying and smiting his breast. So this Gospel appears as though we should become good or pious by our works.

2. Now you have heard that a man, before he can do anything good, must by all means first be good. For the truth must always stand: "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit;" and again, "An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit." Thus a man must first be good, before he can do good. So he also firmly concludes that the publican smote his breast, which proves the conclusion, that he had been good.

3. This has taken place and has been written to the end that we should open our eyes and not judge the people according to their outward appearance. To do this in this instance it is necessary to examine the hearts of both, and not judge according to mere external works. For when the heart is good, the whole man is good. For if I judged the publican according to his works, my judgment would soon be false. For nothing appears in him but sin. Again, if I judge the hypocrite or Pharisee according to his works, I will also miss the mark. For he stands at the holy place, makes the best prayer imaginable, for he praises and thanks God with grand works, he fasts, gives the tenth of all his goods, harms no one; in short, everything,

both outwardly and inwardly, appears well with him.

4. As he judges, all men judge; no one can condemn such an upright and virtuous life. Who dare say that fasting is not good; or that to praise God and give everyone what we owe them is evil? When I see a priest, monk, or nun with such apparent noble conduct, I regard them as pious. Who can say otherwise? Hence if I am to judge whether this one is good and the other evil, I must be able to look into the hearts of both. But I cannot see into the heart, and must make the proper distinction from their works, as Christ says: "By their fruits ye shall know them." Mat. 7:20.

5. He speaks of the publican as though he must have previously heard a word from God that touched his heart so that he believed it and thus became pious, as St. Paul says, Rom. 10:17: "So faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." When the Word falls into the heart, then man becomes pure and good. But the Evangelist does not indicate that he now first heard the Gospel here, but that he heard it somewhere, it matters not where. For he says: "God be merciful to me a sinner." This knowledge is above the powers of reason. And yet it must previously have been known to him that God is merciful, gracious and friendly to all those who confess their sins, who call upon him and long for grace. As he heard that God is gracious by virtue of his very nature, to all those who humble themselves and seek comfort in him. But to preach thus is always the pure Gospel.

6. Hence the beginning of goodness or godliness is not in us, but in the Word of God. God must first let his Word sound in our hearts by which we learn to know and to believe him, and afterwards do good works. So we must believe from this that the publican had learned God's Word. If not, it would certainly have been impossible for him to acknowledge himself to be a poor sinner, as this Gospel reports. Indeed, it has a different appearance here, because St. Luke seems to insist more strongly on external works and appearances than on faith, and lays the emphasis more on the outward character and conduct than on the root and on the faith of the heart within. Nevertheless we must conclude that the publican had previously heard the Gospel. Otherwise his smiting his breast and his humble confession would not have occurred, had he not previously had faith in his heart.

7. This is also proper fruit, since it promotes God's honour; as God desires nothing but the offering of praise, as Psalms, 50:23, says: "Whoso offereth the sacrifice of thanksgiving glorifieth me, and to him that ordereth his way aright, will I show the salvation of God." In this way the publican also proceeds, gives God the offering of thanksgiving and secures to himself the forgiveness of sin, and praises God, puts himself to shame and exalts the truth above himself. Therefore we must praise and commend his work, because he gives God the highest honour and true worship. For he says: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner." As though he would say: I am a rogue, this I confess, as you yourself know. Here you see that he confesses the truth, and is willing that God should reprove and revile him; yea, he does this

himself, and casts himself down the very lowest, and with God he again rises upward, gives glory to God that he is gracious, kind and merciful. But in himself he finds nothing but sin. Wherefore these are the true fruits of faith.

8. Thus we have learned from his fruits the publican's faith. But how shall we understand what Christ says: "This man went down to his house justified," as he had already been just through faith, before he smote his breast? He certainly must have been just before. Why then does Christ say here: "He went down to his house justified?" This is what I have often said, if faith be true, it will break forth and bear fruit. If the tree is green and good, it will not cease to blossom forth in leaves and fruit. It does this by nature. I need not first command it and say: Look here, tree, bear apples. For if the tree is there and is good, the fruit will follow unbidden. If faith is present works must follow. If I confess that I am a sinner, it must follow that I will say: Alas God! I am a rogue, do thou cause me to be good. So this publican cares for nothing and speaks freely, though he puts himself to shame before all people, he does not care for that, as Ps. 116:10 says: "I believe, for I will speak. I was greatly afflicted," and says: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner!" As though he would say: I now see that I am lost, for I am a bad man, and acknowledge my sins. Unless I believe and hold to God's mercy, and take the cup of the Saviour and call upon God's grace, I will be ruined.

9. Thus faith casts itself on God, and breaks forth and becomes certain through its works. When this takes place a person becomes known to me and to other people. For when I thus break forth I spare neither man nor devil, I cast myself down, and will have nothing to do with lofty affairs, and will regard myself as the poorest sinner on earth. This assures me of my, faith. For this is what it says: "This man went down to his house justified." Thus we attribute salvation as the principal thing to faith, and works as the witnesses of faith. They make one so certain that he concludes from the outward life that the faith is genuine.

10. We find this also in Abraham when he offers his son Isaac. Then God said: "For now I know that thou fearest God," Gen. 22:12. Surely, if he had not feared God, he would not have offered his son; and by this we know the fruit to be thoroughly good. Let us now heartily apply this to ourselves.

11. This is why St. Luke and St. James have so much to say about works, so that one says: Yes, I will now believe, and then he goes and fabricates for himself a fictitious delusion, which hovers only on the lips as the foam on the water. No, no; faith is a living and an essential thing, which makes a new creature of man, changes his spirit and wholly and completely converts him. It goes to the foundation and there accomplishes a renewal of the entire man; so, if I have previously seen a sinner, I now see in his changed conduct, manner and life, that he believes. So high and great a thing is faith. For this reason the Holy Spirit urges works, that they may be witnesses of faith. In those therefore in whom we cannot realize good works, we can immediately say and conclude: they heard of faith, but it did not

sink into good soil. For if you continue in pride and lewdness, in greed and anger, and yet talk much of faith, St. Paul will come and say, 1 Cor. 4:20, look here my dear Sir, "the kingdom of God is not in word but in power." It requires life and action, and is not brought about by mere talk.

12. Thus we err on both sides in saying, a person must only believe, then he will neglect to do good works and bring forth good fruits. Again, if you preach works, the people immediately comfort themselves and trust in works. Therefore we must walk upon the common path. Faith alone must make us good and save us. But to know whether faith is right and true, you must show it by your works. God cannot endure your dissembling, for this reason he has appointed you a sermon which praises works, which are only witnesses that you believe, and must be performed not thereby to merit anything, but they should be done freely and gratuitously toward our neighbour.

13. This must be practiced until it becomes a second nature with us. For thus God has also introduced works, as though he would say: if you believe, then you have the kingdom of heaven; and yet, in order that you may not deceive yourselves, do the works. To this the Lord refers in John 15:17, when he says to his disciples: "These things I command you, that ye may love one another." And previous to this at the supper he said, John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another: even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." And shortly before this he said, v. 5: "For I have given you an example, that ye also should do as I have done to you." As though he would say: Ye are my friends, but this the people will not know by your faith, but when you show the fruits of faith, and break forth in love, then they will know you. The fruits will not save you nor make you any friends, but they must show and prove that you are saved and are my friends. Therefore mark this well, that faith alone makes us good; but as faith lies concealed within me, and is a great life, a great treasure, therefore the works must come forth and bear witness of the faith, to praise God's grace and condemn the works of men. You must cast your eyes to the earth and humiliate yourself before everyone, that you may also win your neighbour by your services; for this reason God lets you live, otherwise nothing would be better for you than to die and go to heaven. This you now also observe clearly in the good publican.

14. So you find two judgments: one according to faith, the other according to outward works. The foundation you have in that faith is concealed; this he feels, who believes; but that is not enough, it must express itself as you see above in the publican, who breaks forth in humility, so much as not to lift his eyes to heaven, smites on his breast and praises God, by which he helps me to say when my sins oppress me: Behold, the publican also was a sinner and said: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner;" thus too, I will do. By this will I also be strengthened so that when I see my sins I will think of his example, and with it comfort and strengthen myself, so that I can say: Oh God, I see in the publican that thou art gracious to poor sinners. Faith the believer keeps for himself, but externally he communicates its fruits to other people.

15. The publican is on the right road and is twice justified; once through faith before God, and again by his works to me. Here he gives unto God his glory, and by faith repays him with praise. Also toward me he performs the duty of love, and puts words into my mouth and teaches me how to pray. Now he has paid all his debts toward God and man. So faith urges him to do; without however requiring anything from God as a reward of faith.

16. This is one character of the publican, who, according to faith which is the spiritual judgment, is acknowledged justified, while according to the flesh he is unprofitable. For the Pharisee passes and does not notice him, sees not his faith, lets him stand way back, and sees him alone in his sins, and knows not that God has been gracious to him, and converted and reformed him. So when a carnally minded man would condemn a sinner according to his sins, it is otherwise impossible, he must fail.

17. Let us now consider the fool, the Pharisee. Here are most beautiful works. In the first place he thanks God, fasts twice in the week, and all this to honour God, not St. Nicholas or St. Barnabas, he gives the tenth of all his goods, nor has he at any time committed adultery, has never done any one violence or robbed him of his goods. Thus he has conducted himself in an exemplary manner. This is a beautiful honest life, and excites our wonder and surprise. Truly, after the fashion of the world no one could find fault with him, yea, one must praise him. Yes, to be sure he does this himself.

18. But God is the first to come and say, that all the work of the Pharisee is blasphemy. God help us, what an awful sentence this is! Priests and nuns may well be terrified by it, and all their bones quake, as you scarcely ever find one of them as pious as this Pharisee. Would to God we could have many such hypocrites and Pharisees; for then they could be taught better things.

19. Well, what is the matter with the good man? Only this, he does not know his own heart. Here you see that we are our own greatest enemies, who close our eyes and hearts, and think we are as we feel. For if I should ask any such hypocrite: Sir, do you mean just what you say? he would take an oath, that it is not otherwise. But behold, see how deep God's sword cuts, and pierces through all the recesses of the soul, Heb. 4:12. Here everything must go to ruin, or fall to the earth in humiliation, otherwise nothing can stand before God. Thus a pious woman must here fall down and kiss the vilest harlot's feet, yea, her footprints.

20. Now let us better see and hear what the Lord says to this. There stands the publican and humbles himself, says nothing of fasting, nothing of his good works, nor of anything. Yet the Lord says that his sins are not so great as the sins of the hypocrite; even in spite of anyone now exalting himself above the lowest sinner. If I exalt myself a finger's breadth above my neighbour, or the vilest sinner, then am I cast down. For the publican during his whole life did

not do as many and as great sins as this Pharisee does here when he says: I thank thee God that, I am not as other men are; and lies enough to burst all heaven. From him you hear no word like: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner!" God's mercy, sympathy, patience and love are all forgotten by him, while God is nothing but pure mercy, and he who does not know this, thinks there is no God, as in Psalm 14:1: "The fool hath Said in his heart, There is no God." So it is with an unbeliever who does not know himself. Therefore I say one thing more, if he had committed the vilest sin and deflowered virgins, it would not have been as bad as when he says: "I thank thee God, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican." Yes, yes, do I hear you have no need of God and despise his goodness, mercy, love and everything that God is? Behold, these are thy sins. Hence the public gross sins that break out are insignificant; but unbelief which is in the heart and we cannot see, this is the real sin in which monks and priests strut forth; these lost and corrupt ones are sunk head and ears in this sin, and pretend to be entirely free from it.

21. Further, since he has now blasphemed God and lied to him, because he is unwilling to confess his sins, he falls further and sins against love to his neighbour, in that he says: "Even as this publican." He could not bear his presence without blaming and condemning him. Here all commandments are abolished and transgressed, for he denies God and does his neighbour no good. In this way he goes to ruin, because he has not obeyed a letter of the law. For if he had said: Oh God, we are all sinners, this poor sinner is also like myself and all the rest: and had he joined the congregation and said: Oh God, be merciful unto us! then he would have fulfilled God's commandment, namely, the first, in that he gave God the honour and the praise, and had he afterwards said: Oh God, I see this one is a sinner, in the jaws of the devil; dear Lord, help him! and had he thus brought him to God and prayed to God for him, he would then also have obeyed the other commandment of Christian love as Paul says, Gal. 6:2, and teaches: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

22. Now he comes and praises himself that he is just. He has a poisonous, wicked heart, who praises himself most gloriously on account of his pretended good works, how he fasted and gave the tenth of all he had. Hence he is so full of hatred to his neighbour, if God allowed him to judge, he would plunge the poor publican down into the deepest hell. Behold, is not this a wicked heart and terrible to hear, that I would all men should go to ruin, if only I be praised? Yet all this is so finely decorated and adorned by external conduct, that no one can censure it. Here we see how we are to know the tree from its fruits. For when I view his heart with spiritual eyes, I recognize it is full of blasphemy and hatred to his neighbour. From these fruits I know that the tree is evil. For works would not be evil in themselves, but the evil root in the heart makes them evil. This is set before us that we may beware and guard ourselves against it.

23. Again, on the other hand, examine the heart also of the publican. Here we find that he believes. Hence his works are good and of service to the whole world, for he teaches that a man should humble himself and praise God. On the contrary the other with his works makes

saints who are puffed up and proud of heart; for he is entrapped in sins, his soul is condemned, and is fast in the jaws of the devil, and the high minded knave steps forth and praises himself, because his neighbour over there is a sinner. To sum up all, he misleads the whole world with his hypocritical life. Thus we must judge the fruits with spiritual eyes as we have now judged these two; then we will know the tree whether it be good or evil.

24. Now, where did I obtain this judgment? Here: God has given me his law like a mirror, in which I see what is good and evil. It says: Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbour as thyself," Deut. 6:5, Mat. 22:37. Now the works of the publican praise God and benefit the whole world, because they teach us to know, and show us the way of God our Saviour. Therefore they are good because they praise God and benefit our neighbour. On the other hand, the hypocrite struts forth and blasphemes God, and with his corrupt life misleads the whole world.

25. I should also speak of the great and shameful vice of slander, when one belies another, exposes him and speaks evil of him; while we are all alike after all, and no one has a reason to exalt himself above another. But that the government judges and punishes crime, it does by virtue of its office. For it wields the sword to make the transgressor fear. For God will not tolerate sin, and desires that the wicked have no rest, as the prophet Isaiah says, 48:22: "There is no peace, saith Jehovah, to the wicked." Therefore where God does not internally disturb sinners, he will wipe out sin by fire and water, that they can have no peace from without. When such sins are to be punished, the officers, judges and people should think thus: Oh God! although I myself am a poor sinner and a much greater one than this person, and a much greater thief and adulterer than this one; still I will execute my office and leave him no rest in his sins and belabour him; for this is thy divine command. Concerning this I have said more on other occasions, especially in my book on the Civil Government, which you can read yourself; for the present let this suffice, and pray God for grace

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