

Sermon – Luke 18:9-14
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“Empty-handed before the Cross”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It's an exercise with which we are all familiar, that of demonstrating how we are worthy, which usually amounts to how we are better than others. This weekend we had a wonderful high school lock-in, attended by 19 of our students, a great sign for youth ministry at Grace. Hanging out with high schoolers, I'm reminded of how difficult it is to be a young person. To be sure, the teenage years are a carefree time, or at least that's how we remember those years. There is truth to that, but alongside that truth is another truth, equally powerful. Our young people are taught from an early age to stand out, to achieve, to be *better than others*. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more true than the process of figuring out what will happen after high school. I recall my own process of applying for colleges, and how that shaped my life during high school. Sure, I wanted to do well in school, participate in Boy Scouts and church youth group, and volunteer in my community because these were good things to do. But I also wanted to make sure that I had achievements I could stack up on my resume when I applied to highly selective colleges. See what I did there? It's important to me even now for you to know that I went to a highly selective college; aren't I impressive! This does not, of course, end with high school and college; these are just the beginning. Every time we apply for a job, it's not just about demonstrating our competency; it's about being better than the others looking for the same job. So much of life is about being better than, different than, *other than* the others. Today, no doubt,

we're thinking, at least we're not like those poor Dodgers fans, bereft of hope! We see it even in presidential politics, where during this cycle some voters have nothing more to say than at least she isn't him or he isn't her.

2. And so, we are brought once more this morning into the temple in Jesus' familiar parable. We see into the souls of two men as they stand in prayer before God. And honestly, there is little doubt as to who would get the job offer, unless the job is to be a rapacious, pernicious, selfish jerk of a tax collector. The Pharisee is so clearly the man for the job; it ain't even close. Before we slam the door on the Pharisee, it's worth noting that he really is qualified by any rational standard. Pharisees devoted themselves to the keeping of God's law as a means of seeking righteousness before God. And this guy has it down pat. He's not like those others; he keeps the law, he fasts for the sake of holiness, and he gives ten percent of his money to further the work of God in the world. We're doing new member classes right now, and this Pharisee would be most welcome! A few more like him and our yearly budget challenges would be a thing of the past. To top it all off, he's thankful to God!

3. So what, we may well ask if we didn't already know the end of the story, is the problem with the Pharisee? The problem is not with what he's been up to; he's been up to good, and plenty of it. The problem, of course, is not his righteousness, but his self-righteousness. But that's a little too easy, and doesn't quite get to the core of Jesus' declaration that it is the Pharisee, and not the societal scumbag that is the tax collector, who goes away unjustified. So go back a minute, back to the Pharisee's prayer of thanksgiving. For what is he thankful? That he is *not like other people* – the robbers, evildoers, and adulterers. What's so bad about that? Well, two things. First, the Pharisee is confusing his good deeds of righteousness with the one thing that God truly seeks – total dependence upon God's goodness and grace rather than his own *curriculum vitae*. And second, in his thankfulness for his righteousness, he

commits an even greater sin, that of separating himself from the tax collector and all those who stand in need of God's grace. The Pharisee has become, in Mark Twain's words, "a good man in the worst sense of the word." His motivation for doing good has turned from joyful faith inward to self-righteousness. He wants to stand out and stand apart, to be different from this world's tax collectors and sinners. Problem is, he's a sinner, too; problem is, he's forgotten that God loves sinners like the tax collector and has not yet apprehended that God in Christ is at work to save even the worst of this world.

4. This is where Jesus' parable turns from a comforting morality tale to a trap sprung upon us all. If you're anything like me, you're probably thinking, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee!" And that makes us, here in our religious devotion, *exactly* like the Pharisee. Because even our humility is a trap that will close upon us, turning devotion and humility into something impressive about ourselves. Pride, after all, is pride, and judgment of others is judgmental, even if we have the good sense to keep it to ourselves.
5. The point, Jesus preaches, is not to be humble instead of proud, even if that's in some way better. The point is that the board of college admissions is closed and the deadline for job applications was yesterday. Jesus is not giving advice on how to get ahead in this world or into the next. He lifts up the tax collector not because he's figured out the right religious formula but because he's simply a total jerk who is so far gone that he knows he has no hope but grace. By our calculations, he's dead meat, the furthest thing from righteous a person could be. All he can do is call out for mercy. Oddly enough, that's exactly what he gets. No strings, no conditions, no demand from God in the temple to go and do better and come back next week, looking a little bit more like the Pharisee. Even here, while we wish that the Pharisee would become a bit more like the tax collector, so too do we want the tax collector to become a little bit more like the Pharisee. But what we would impose God fails to

- demand. God's mercy is conditioned only by the One who gives it. Nothing is required other than sheer, naked faithfulness to the One who can grant mercy, Jesus Christ, the One who came to save sinners. Nothing else matters, and nothing else will save us in God's sight. It is not, finally, our righteousness – what we do – that will sway God's judgment. It is Jesus, the One who justifies, in his living and dying and rising for the sake of sinners, who is our hope – our only hope, and more than enough hope for each of us, for all of us.
6. So. Stop trying to be impressive, and for goodness' sake stop comparing yourselves to others and thinking that God is impressed. After all, the more you try to stand out, the more alone you'll end up standing; the more you will tear the fabric among us that God is seeking to knit back together. Come instead before the cross empty-handed of your own works and resume and receive the gifts of the God who desires only to be with you, and for you to be with others. In coming, finally, to see that God loves Pharisees and tax collectors, saints and sinners, we can also begin to see that God desires Pharisees and tax collectors to be together in community, living as one and learning from each other as we all settle into the odd reality of God's grace for all who seek mercy. Our piles of accomplishments, if we're not careful, will only drive us further from the God who seeks to be in our midst. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing." God, you see, simply loves us – so much so that Jesus came to die for us. And if Christ has died for me, so too has Christ died for you. We're covered, clothed in righteousness and justification that can come only from God. That, my friends, is simply enough. We won't ever get there on our own, because that was never the point. In Christ, we're already there, right where we need to be. Amazingly, we're there together, just how God wants us. Draw near to God, and let God draw you closer to one another, even those whose views and values seem so wrong to us. Cry out together, "Be merciful to us, sinners that we are!" And find yourselves made alive in Christ, together. And be thankful – not that you

are *not* like them, but that God in Christ has come to save all who would call upon Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.