

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Jesus shares with us another parable to help us grow closer to Him (Luke 18:9-14). This parable is about a Pharisee and a tax collector. We have to be careful when reading this: because of the conflicts between some of the Pharisees and Jesus, we often see the Pharisee as the bad guy. With this prejudice, we will miss the shock of Jesus' parable. Jesus begins:

**Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector.** (Luke 18:10)

What would the initial response and assumption of the listeners be? The Pharisees were those who kept the Law of God. They actually separated themselves from much of society because of their dedication to God and His Law. The initial response of the listener is that the Pharisee will be the hero of this story. The words that follow would be a confirmation to the hearers:

**The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income."** (Luke 18:11-12)

The reaction: Yes! See how he has given up so much for God and for the Temple! Jesus is still bringing them along, and they think the Pharisee is the hero.

Then there's the tax collector. Tax collectors were in league with the Roman Empire, enemies of Israel. They were people after their own success and gain at the expense of their countrymen. The response of the listener is that the tax collector will be the antagonist of this story. When he entered the Temple, he

**stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner"** (Luke 18:13)

The listeners would have thought, "Yes, that is the proper response... stay at a distance, since you are not worthy to enter the Temple, defiled as you are by your association with the Gentile. You don't even deserve to look up to God."

Then Jesus gives the plot twist:

**I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.** (Luke 18:14)

WHAT?! Wait, the tax collector is the hero of the story, not the Pharisee?! What a reversal of expectation! But, the Pharisee did everything right! What's with that?!

Did the Pharisee do everything right? Externally, yes. Time and again, though, Jesus shows that God is interested not simply with external observance, but with the heart. At the heart of this story is humility versus pride. It is the humble whom God exalts, while casting down the proud (see Luke 1:51-52). We can cover over our arrogance and judgment by what we do. We can put on a "good front," keeping our masks on to hide the reality of our brokenness, but God sees the heart. He knows what is going on inside of us. Our self-reliance actually repels God! As St. Therese once said, "Our good works *condemn us* if we rely on them!" It is not that our good works have no place in the economy of salvation (more on that later), but that they are not what saves us; God is the One who saves us, and so we must rely on Him alone!

I think we end up doing so much because we're afraid to face our own brokenness, weakness and inadequacy... I know *I am*. We put on masks to keep others – and ourselves – from seeing how much we are really hurting, weak, and insecure. But notice in the parable that it is by his humility, crying out for mercy, that the tax collector is justified. In his lowliness, he throws himself in confidence into God's Hands – and God cannot resist. Jesus speaks words to his secretary of Divine Mercy – St. Faustina – saying,

**The greater the sinner, the greater the right he has to My mercy. ... He who trusts in My mercy will not perish.** (*Diary 723*)

**There is no misery that could be a match for My mercy, neither will misery exhaust it, because as it is being granted – it increases.** (*Diary 1273*)

It is actually our misery and our *trust* in God's mercy that draws Him to us and us to Him!

So what is the place of works? Back to St. Therese of Lisieux:

**I've always remained little, therefore, having no other occupation but to gather flowers, the flowers of love and sacrifice, and of offering them to God in order to please Him.** ("The Yellow Notebook, 6 August 1897)

Our good works help us to grow, to go beyond ourselves, but love must be the motivation – love of God. Our good works become flowers that we offer to our loving Father! A little child bringing a bouquet of the tiniest flowers to her father is not disdained because the flowers are not roses or lilies. Rather, the father sees the love behind the gesture, and that small act of love moves his heart. So our good works are nothing of themselves, but when done with love, they pierce the Heart of God, and He cannot resist us.

May we truly grow in love of God, humbling ourselves to receive His mercy, and using our good works to offer flowers of love and sacrifice to our Father!