

If you ask me, there are few recreational activities that require more courage than skydiving. To be honest, even rollercoasters are a stretch for me, let alone jumping out of a plane at 14,000 feet. Maybe what makes it so scary is that you need to have a high level of trust that everything is going to go exactly right, because there is very little room for error. Now, most places will make you jump with an experienced skydiver strapped to your back who will do everything for you, so once you jump out of the plane it doesn't actually matter what you do. In that moment you've probably forgotten everything you heard in the pre-jump training session anyway. All that matters is that when the guy strapped to your back pulls that sting, the parachute comes out of the backpack and slows your fall, bringing you to the ground safely. Maybe what makes skydiving so difficult is having to rely completely on something outside of yourself.

One tendency of sinful mankind is the desire to rely completely on ourselves. To want to be in control and self-sufficient all the time....even when it comes to receiving God's grace. This issue—the idea of earning God's grace—was running rampant in the church leading up to the time of Martin Luther's Reformation. Leaders in the church in Rome were teaching that your spot in heaven, your salvation, in part depended on YOU. So YOU better be good enough and do the right things if you want to be saved. In his earlier years Luther struggled with this to the point of despair.

In the Gospel from Luke 18, Jesus shows us that we need to shift our gaze—to turn our eyes off ourselves and onto our Savior. The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a fitting lesson for Reformation Sunday because in it, Jesus teaches us to let go of the idea that we can save ourselves, and instead to cling to the message of his grace alone—to **cling to the cross**. Today Jesus poses us with a couple questions:

1. **What's your confession?**
2. **Where's your faith?**

Luke records: **"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.'"** Maybe you can already see where Jesus is going here. He's talking to some people who think pretty highly of themselves, probably some Pharisees in the crowd, and he's about to challenge their whole idea of righteousness.

Two confessions are made in the temple. Let's start with the Pharisee's confession: He stood up and he prayed, **"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector."** You can almost hear him shudder as the words "tax collector" come out of his mouth. Tax collectors were not popular people in Jesus' day. They weren't exactly known to be stand-up citizens. In fact, they were pretty much universally despised. Tax collectors were known to cheat their own people out of their money, by collecting too much and making themselves rich. So as this Pharisee prays, probably standing in

a place where he could be seen and heard, his confession is a proud one. Notice his prayer: he started by addressing God, but then what's the rest of the prayer about? It's about himself and how good he is, but certainly not a confession of sin.

There's a little—or not so little—Pharisee in all of us that tempts us to ignore our sinfulness. To think of ourselves as good and others as wicked, or at least, not as good as us. It tempts us to say, “See, God, how good I am. I thank you that I'm not like some other people today—people who murder, steal, or cheat. Look at my coworker and how he lives his life, I'm a better person than he is. Look at him, look at her; look at their kids...God, you must just shake your head when you look at them. But you have to be at least a little happier with me.”

And yeah, maybe outwardly you might look better than your neighbor in the eyes of the world. But is that your confession? When you come to worship, is that what you bring to the altar, like the Pharisee in the parable?

This temptation only comes naturally. Because how much of our everyday world isn't based on a merit system, and comparing ourselves to others? For example, if you want that scholarship, then you have to get the best grades. If you want that promotion, then you have to be better than your coworker. But when it comes to life with God, everything gets flipped around.

Let's look at the other man's confession. The tax collector said, **“God, I'm a sinner.”** And not just “a” sinner, but Luke expressed it as “the” sinner. This tax collector regarded himself as “the chief of sinners.” Did you notice how his body language matched his words?

He **“stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast.”** Maybe staying in the outer court of the temple, feeling too unworthy to come near the more holy, front part of the sanctuary, he hangs his head. This man is in deep, deep sorrow over his sins. He doesn't try to hide it, knowing he could never hide anything from God. He doesn't look around to compare himself to anyone else, but confessed his utter unworthiness before God. His confession was simple: “I'm a sinner.”

So we've seen two confessions. Let your confession be like the tax collector's. “I'm a sinner. I am simply unworthy to stand before God. My sins separate me from my God, and I deserve his wrath.” It's that confession that led Martin Luther to a point of despair because he couldn't figure out how to make himself right with God. This confession brings us to that uncomfortable place where we know we can't do a thing to help ourselves.

But we know, as Luther later learned, that it's when we're brought down to this deep pit of despair that the gospel sounds the sweetest. Because the gospel says you *have* been helped. You *have* been made right with God, and your forgiveness is free. It comes completely from outside yourself. Paul put that message in these words: **“Christ died for the ungodly....While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6,8)** And we sing in the hymn, “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me.”

When your confession matches the tax collector's, that's when you're prepared to hear that good news about Jesus. That's our confession. Now the second question we want to ask is,

Where does your faith lie? Jesus' parable shows us two men who placed their faith in opposite places. Let's start with the Pharisee's again: He said, **"I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.** And by the way, that's only part of it. I also keep the rest of the law of Moses so well that the most upright religious leader in Jerusalem would have a hard time accusing me of anything." This isn't so much a prayer as it was just bragging about himself. He doesn't feel the need to ask for forgiveness. He believes he's already right with God. This Pharisee feels good because of what *he's* brought to God. What *he's* done for God. Where's his faith? His faith lies in himself.

There's a little—or not so little—Pharisee in all of us that wants to put our faith in ourselves by feeling good about our own righteousness. That Pharisee in us says, "See, God, how good I am. See what I do for you. See what I sacrifice for you." The sinful nature in us will feel good and tell us we've done something that might bring us a little bit closer to heaven.

Again, this temptation only comes too naturally in this world. For most other things in our lives, we have to depend on ourselves to achieve our goals. For example, if you want to make the starting lineup this year, you have to work out every day to get faster and stronger, because that's how you're gonna do it.

For your biggest goal, though—the right to go to heaven—you can't depend on yourself. Because **"There is no one who does good, not even one"** (Psalm 53:3). But also, because *it's already been achieved for you*. So we don't come here to do a favor for God like the Pharisee thought he was doing. That's not why we're here this morning. Rather, we're here to *receive* God's favor. And that's what the tax collector did. Where did the tax collector place his faith?

He said, **"God, have mercy on me."** The only place his faith could be was in the merciful God. The tax collector knew how in his job he'd cheated people out of money, how bad of a person he'd been. He knew that he didn't stand a chance. So he didn't bring a litany of good deeds. He didn't bring a list of redeeming qualities. He didn't bring his own righteousness. He showed up empty-handed and he leaned on the one thing he knew could save him. He leaned on the rich mercy of a loving God. His faith lay in the fact that God's grace and mercy came to condemned sinners who have nothing to offer God. His faith lay in the fact that Christ came for sinners like him.

We know how the parable ends: Jesus told his audience, **"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."**

Where does your faith lie? Is it like the Pharisee's or the tax collector's? Let it be like the tax collector's. When you come to church and pray, pray like him. King David outlined a good prayer to use:

“Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your **unfailing love**;
according to your **great compassion**
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.” Ps 51:1–2

Let your faith rest in God alone, because as David wrote, his love is unfailing and his compassion is great. That prayer reflects faith in Jesus, who brought God’s mercy from heaven for us. He came with all compassion to heal sinners and wash away every trace of their guilt.

504 years ago Martin Luther set in motion a Reformation that brought the church back to the pure teaching of God’s Word. Sometime before that, Luther finally had that lightbulb moment that changed everything for him. It was an “a-ha” moment when he saw clearly from Romans chapter 1 what the righteousness of God is, as revealed in the gospel. He had previously only seen the “righteousness” of God in the sense of an angry God demanding perfection. But the righteousness of the gospel is the righteousness God credits to us, that of his Son, removing the punishment we deserved. And so you can boldly say with Luther, “Yes, I am certainly a sinner, but God is gracious to me. I was God’s enemy, but now he is my friend. I have deserved nothing but wrath in hell; but he has given me the free gift of eternal life.”

It’s not easy to let go of the idea that we can somehow help God get us to heaven. But we must. In his hymn “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” Augustus Toplady wrote these words: **“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”** In Jesus’ parable the Pharisee brought in his hands his fasting and his tithing and his generally good life. But what did the tax collector bring? Nothing. When you come to meet God in his Word, empty your hand, so that you can cling to the cross of Christ. Come a sinner, and leave justified. Come humbled, and leave exalted. Amen.