

+

These last three weeks the Collects have invited us to consider God's Will. We have prayed that we will be enabled to live according to God's Will, we have prayed that we will ask such things of God as shall please Him, and this morning we pray that we will be given the grace to keep God's commandments and obtain his gracious promises and heavenly treasure. God's gracious promises and heavenly treasure provide quite the incentive for discerning God's Will for our lives. In the Gospel, Jesus presents us with two characters that challenge us to consider how we think about God and His Will, and how we think about ourselves. What we think about God, His nature and characteristics, His Will, and ourselves, ultimately informs how we pray. We see this in *the Parable of the Pharisee and Publican*. Jesus is not criticizing all Pharisees in this parable, for there were those good Pharisees who were known for their true devotion and humility to God, like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus one night to ask how he could be saved. Likewise, Jesus is not holding up all publicans, or tax collectors of His day, as good, humble, and meek. There were some Tax Collectors who proved the stereotype true as men who did the dirty work of the Roman Empire while extorting their neighbors and living lavishly.

Both men in this morning's parable half-consciously show us what they believe about God. They describe themselves in their prayers honestly. What does the Pharisee reveal to us about his concept of God? He lists his many traits, which he considered righteous. He recalls that in tithing and fasting he had done more than the law required. He was a patriot and an upright man. He was, as one commentator jokingly writes, probably the chairman for Founders' Day and the temple charity fund. This is the burden of his prayer. The Pharisee seems to regard God as a kind of corporation in which he had earned stock. His prayer reveals that he believes he has worked his way into deserving God's blessings. He tells God that he is waiting for his well-deserved honors and benefits. He thought that God owed him something. The Pharisee is very much an early *Pelagian*, an adherent to that ancient heresy that taught that the more one responds to God's Grace, the more Grace they will obtain. They ignored the fact that God's Grace is completely free to undeserving humanity. The keyword of the Pharisee's prayer is "I", revealing that his prayer was really directed at himself.

The prayer of the *Publican*, or tax collector, is simple, *God be merciful to me a sinner*. His prayer is a prayer of repentance, he is clearly convicted of his sin. We see in the Gospel that he prayed in a way that reveals his guilt, shame,

and remorse. He did not dare even lift his eyes to heaven, but smote his breast, and cried out to God. He pleaded with God to cleanse his soul that he clearly viewed as polluted and contaminated. Jesus says that it was this man, this tax collector, who left the temple *justified*. Jesus does not mean that he left righteous, but instead accepted of God's grace. The Pharisee had everything in his favor, but humility; the publican had nothing in his favor, except humility. The Pharisee's center of the world was himself, but the publican recognized how desperately he had to make God the center of his world.

We also see what these two men think of themselves and their neighbors. The Pharisee is a proud man, arrogant, and uncharitable. He saw himself as a class above those around him, and not of the crowd of the unworthy and unclean, especially men like today's Publican. Meanwhile, the Publican stands off by himself in the Temple, away from the crowd such as the Pharisee, because he felt himself unworthy of their friendship. He knew his sinfulness, he recognized his corrupt office, his heart was moved to contrition and repentance. In the Pharisee we find all manner of Class Prejudice. Jesus is telling us that the Pharisee was comfortable and self-righteous, he did not care how the other half of the world live. He tells us that the Pharisee could have had many a grace if he had lived in lowliness and humility; He shows us that the publican had humility of soul, and therefore his many sins were forgiven.

The Pharisee and the publican are balanced out this morning by the witness of St. Paul in the Epistle. In the person of St. Paul, we encounter a Pharisee who was converted to Christ. He tells us of the appearances of the Resurrected Lord after Easter Sunday, and includes that Jesus appeared to Him as well. He calls himself an Apostle, but instead of speaking with the power and authority that we would expect such a man to have, he says of himself that he is the least of the Apostles. He confesses that he once persecuted the Church of God, and in complete humility he says *that by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all...yet not I*, he admits it was not by his own merit or hard work, *but the grace of God which was with me*. St. Paul was once the Pharisee very much like the man in today's Parable, but it was Christ who helped him to realize the necessity of sharing in the posture and prayer of the Publican.

We may also recognize that we must pray as this publican has, that we must share in the attitude of St. Paul, confessing that whatever good is within us is because of the work of God and His Grace. But we must remember to be

like the Publican when we are assaulted with the trials of this fallen world. We must not sink into self-pity, into that state of soul that cries out *Why me? Why now? How can a good God allow this to befall me?* The bitter truth is that we will be called upon to suffer and struggle our way to His Kingdom. His Grace alone is the gift that keeps us right with Himself. We should expect nothing more than His Grace *to help in time of need*. St. Paul suffered his whole life, and he put on the spiritual character of today's *Publican*. We should do the same. Our faith is called to embrace God's Grace alone in our lives if we hope to reach Heaven. We must remember that God is burning holiness, and by the fire of his love even a crooked tax collector and a self-righteous, persecuting Pharisee named Saul can be converted and transformed. For this is God's gracious promise, and heavenly treasure, not that we will be granted whatever favors or blessings we desire most, but complete transformation by God's Grace and love, as we keep our eyes on Jesus and plead the mercy of our Heavenly Father. Amen.