

**Luke 18:9-14**  
**This Man Went Home Justified**  
**Ironies of the Passion Sermon Series #1**  
**February 10, 2016**

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*

*"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

*"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (NIV84)*

"It's not my fault!" Does that sound familiar? If you're a supervisor, you've probably heard an employee say that. If you're a teacher, you've heard a student say it. And if you have children, it probably feels like "It's not my fault!" were your child's very first spoken words--and are still their most frequently spoken ones.

But those words rarely stand alone. They're almost inevitably followed by more words in which the person attempts to justify themselves. That is, they explain exactly why it's not their fault and why what they did in this case was the absolutely wise--and especially right--thing to do. They are attempting to declare themselves—and prove themselves to be—"not guilty."

It's kind of ironic that while "justify" is one of the most important words in the Bible, what we are doing when we justify ourselves by saying "It's not my fault!" and explaining why that is the case is so far removed from what the Bible has to say about that word.

"Irony" is defined by one dictionary as "a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite...of what might be expected." During this Lenten season we're going to look at some of the ironies of Jesus' passion.

Tonight, Ash Wednesday, we're going to look at a parable that Jesus told in which the exact opposite of what we would expect occurs. One could say that the irony is found in that one of the men went home justified. That already would be the opposite of what we might expect. But the irony is even greater when we consider that Jesus said, "*This man went home justified.*"

Now when we today hear that a Pharisee went to the temple to pray, we arch our eyebrows and roll our eyes, because to us "Pharisee" means one thing: Proud, Self-Righteous Hypocrite. But to the first-century Jew, *Pharisee* meant something else. There's a reason that the Apostle Paul was once upon a time proud to be known as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were people who defended a strict interpretation of the Old Testament. Whereas the Sadducees were like so many theological liberals in Christianity today who treat God's Word as something to be molded and shaped to fit their views, and as something to be discarded when necessary, the Pharisees were the ones who said that the Bible was really the Word of God and that therefore it needed to be regarded as the truth—all of it.

More than that, the Pharisees appeared to live that Word of God. So when this man said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer—especially in comparison to others—he was right!

He had never broken into anyone's house. He'd probably never even shoplifted! He didn't sleep around—not even before he got married! He had never done anything that could have landed him in jail. In modern terms, he probably didn't even have so much as a parking ticket on his record.

Any first-century Jew was able to see a clear difference between the Pharisees and the tax collectors. Tax collectors were collaborators—with the Romans! In a word, they were traitors. But one needed more words than that to describe the depths of the sinfulness of the tax collectors. They collected more than the government required, and then kept the difference for themselves. In the gospels, we frequently see them keeping company with prostitutes and other people known to be the worst kind of sinners.

If you're known by the company you keep, you're also usually affected by the company you keep, so it's likely that tax collectors plunged into other kinds of sin as well.

Put the tax collector who took more than he was owed up against the Pharisee who gave 10% of all he had to the Lord, put the Pharisee who fasted two times every week (when even God himself had only commanded 1 per year) up against the tax collector who probably never fasted but gorged himself instead and didn't even have the decency to refrain from debauchery on religious holidays, and if one of them was going to go home justified, declared by God to be "not guilty", it was pretty clear which of the two it was going to be.

And while few of Jesus' listeners would have claimed to be quite as good as the Pharisee, most of them would have identified more closely with the Pharisee—because they felt that in reality, their lives were much closer to that of the Pharisee.

Is your life closer to that of the Pharisee? I suppose it would depend on what we're comparing ourselves to. If we're comparing ourselves to many of the people we know—and especially the people that we see on TV and read about in the papers—then we might say without fear of being contradicted, yes, our life is closer to the Pharisees.

In fact, we might even say that our life surpasses that of the Pharisees—because while we also are not robbers or adulterers, we maintain a semblance of humility that the Pharisee just wasn't able to pull off with his weak attempt to disguise his bragging as prayer—a bragging that became impossible to hide when he tilted his head contemptuously in the tax collector's direction and said "or even like this tax collector."

Putting aside the irony of proudly proclaiming our humility, let's assume that we are correct in saying that we are not like tax collectors and that we are in fact even better than Pharisees.

That's not the comparison we should be making.

We should be comparing ourselves against God and his holiness and the standard of absolute perfection that he has set when it comes to keeping his commands.

That's what it takes to be justified, to be declared "not guilty."

In which case the tax collector had absolutely no chance. Compared to the Pharisee...well, if you had to choose one of them as a neighbor, you'd go with the Pharisee. You wouldn't have to hide your wallet whenever the Pharisee stopped by your house. You could safely send your grade-school age daughter to play with the Pharisee's daughter--but you'd never consider sending her next door if the tax collector were your neighbor--because you'd know that there was a far greater chance of her being exposed to foul language, unspiritual attitudes, bad company, and general immorality.

Whereas the Pharisee could at least make some efforts at justifying himself, the tax collector--how could he justify himself? "God, I may be the scum of the earth--but when it comes to scum, I'm some of the higher scum out there."

No, the tax collector didn't even try. He mounted no defense. He knew that in God's courtroom, none of the normal tricks would do. He couldn't attempt to distract the jury by confusing the issue. He couldn't get clean-shaven and put on a nice suit to convince God that he was by and large a fine upstanding citizen who had innocently become involved in a dustup or two. He didn't bluster, he didn't charm, he didn't...

He didn't really do anything!

He admitted that he was a sinner. Instead of saying "It's not my fault!" he essentially said, "Yup, I did it! I'm guilty! It's all my fault!"

How surprising is it, then, to hear Jesus say, "This man went home justified." This man went home declared not guilty by God, at peace with God.

But don't misunderstand. It wasn't merely because he humbled himself, because he was honest about his sins. Honesty about one's sins does not mean that those sins never happened. A judge who releases those who confess their crimes would be a terrible judge. Payment must still be made for their crimes.

Something else other than mere humility needs to take place for one to be exalted, to be declared not guilty, to be exalted in God's sight.

That's where Lent comes in. That's where Jesus comes in.

The tax collector went home justified because he knew what was going to be done with his sins. He knew that they would be taken from him and placed on Jesus. He knew that he had, like a sheep, gone astray--sometimes way, way astray--but that the Lord would lay his iniquities, his sins, on Jesus—and that Jesus would take those sins to a cross and receive the “Guilty!” verdict that they deserved.

He knew that not only was he unable to justify himself, but there was also no need for him to do so, because God had had mercy on him and forgiven him for Jesus' sake.

Ash Wednesday is a day on which worshipers in some Christian churches come forward for the “imposition of ashes.” The presiding minister then puts ashes on their forehead in the shape of a cross.

I've never done that. But if I were to do it, I would not do so as a means of justifying myself--as though walking around with soot on my forehead was somehow payment enough to God for my sins. I would do it as a confession.

I don't mean that I'd do it as a confession to others. There's no guarantee that others would understand what it meant--although it might be a good conversation starter that would allow me to tell them what it meant.

I mean that I'd do it as a confession to God. It would serve as a confession that I realize that am nothing but dust. God created my ancestor Adam from the dust of the ground, and when I die my body will return to the dust from which it came.

More than that, it would serve as a confession to God that I am a sinner who needs to repent. In the Old Testament, the Jews would sometimes symbolize their repentance by putting ashes on themselves. In the parable that Jesus told, the tax collector showed his repentance by standing at a distance and not even looking up to heaven.

It is good for us to recognize our sinfulness and confess it, whether with words of confession or also with symbolic actions such as bowing our heads or having ashes put on them.

But it's also good for us to take to heart the surprising words spoken by Jesus: "This man went home justified." The tax collector went home declared not guilty!

We're sure of that because of what else is on foreheads during Ash Wednesday. Not just ashes—ashes in the shape of a cross. I like that. I like that it reminds me not only of my sin, but of the price that my Savior paid for my sin.

But I think that if I ever participated in "the imposition of ashes", if I ever received ashes on my forehead in the shape of a cross, I'd want something else as well.

We read of the posture and attitude of the tax collector as he confessed his sins--standing at a distance, not even looking up to heaven, beating his breast, humble confession that it was all his fault.

We don't read of the posture and attitude of the tax collector afterwards. I'd like to believe that he stopped beating his breast, that he lifted up his head and looked up to heaven, and that in the peace of forgiveness he praised the Lord as one who had lost every guilty stain and had all his sins washed away. (See Christian Worship, hymn 112, verses 1-2)

I don't expect that my wishes are going to change hundreds of years of practice, but...if I ever received ashes on my forehead as part of worship, I'd also want to come forward later in the service and have that stain washed away as a reminder, as an assurance that I was going to go home justified.

If you didn't walk in here this evening with your head bowed down, I hope that the reminder of your sinfulness before God led you to bow your head and make no excuses. But when you walk out of here this evening, walk out with your head up--because you, yes you, are surely going home justified. Amen.

It's kind of ironic that we use the word *justify* for that, because *justify* is one of the most important words in the Bible. It means that God declares us not guilty in his courtroom.

## I.

Now, maybe this parable doesn't seem all that ironic to us. But the gospel promises a result that is the opposite of what anyone would have the right to expect. Jesus wanted his hearers to be surprised when he told them that ***this man went home justified, not the man who tried to follow God's laws.***

So what was the problem? It was the pride of his heart. One of the great ironies we learn from Scripture is that even though we might be doing the right thing, if it's for the wrong reason, we're still guilty of sin. This man was confident of his own righteousness. He thought he was earning points with God by what he was doing. He thought that he was coming out ahead in God's record book. Why wasn't he? Because he ignored everything God said in the Old Testament about needing a new heart, about approaching God with humility, and about being a sinner who is saved by God's mercy.

Another great irony of Scripture is that people who think they can keep God's laws always seem to have to rewrite those laws. They always cut off the parts they can't keep—like having a pure heart and a humble spirit or avoiding lust and greed and coveting. Then they add things they can do—like fasting twice a week or giving a tenth of their income to church. They then tell themselves that they are doing God's will. That simply is not true. This man was not justified. In God's court, he was still guilty.

Jesus is the only reason God accepts our efforts. He died and paid for the sin in our hearts that contaminates every effort we ever make to serve God. He died and paid for the pride and sin that cuts off those parts of God's law we cannot do and that adds things God never commanded. His sufferings and death erase all of God's record of our sin. And his resurrection makes us perfect in God's sight. Because God sees Jesus when he looks at us, what we do here pleases him. Because we have been declared righteous because of what Jesus did for us—justified, to use the biblical term—we want to serve our Lord with our offerings, our time, and our effort. Because of Jesus and his mercy, we do all those difficult things, like refusing to pray with people who don't share our confession or avoiding temptation in our entertainment choices. Knowing God's mercy in Christ is the key difference that Jesus illustrated with these two sinners who went up to the temple to pray.

## II.

The irony in this parable is that the man who thought of himself as a committed, churchgoing follower of God failed to grasp the meaning of repentance for a new life. But the man who lived a sinful life understood what it means to repent, and he threw himself on God's mercy. ***This man, who humbled himself before God, went home justified.***

The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He prayed simply, **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** He understood that he could make no defense in God’s courtroom. In our society, even the most obviously guilty criminals have a right to a defense in court. They can hire a lawyer. They can try to convince the jury that they really didn’t do whatever they’re accused of. They can sing and dance and argue, and sometimes it even works. But in God’s courtroom, there are no lawyers’ games. There are no technicalities. There are no miscarriages of justice. God has all the evidence before him because he knows all that we’ve done and said and even all that we’ve thought and felt.

This tax collector didn’t lie to himself about his righteousness. He understood that the only verdict God’s court could possibly render was guilty. So he threw himself on God’s mercy. What is mercy? It’s the desire to help someone who’s in trouble. It’s what we feel when we see news reports about cities destroyed by hurricanes, and so we send money to buy blankets and medicine. God has mercy on sinners. He knows that we deserve to die and go to hell, but he loves us and wants us to reach heaven. So he sent his Son to live and die and rise again to wipe away all record of our sin.

In his mercy, he comes to us in his Word and tells us that good news. In his Word he touches our broken hearts and gives us faith and hope to stand before him and confess our sin and plead for forgiveness. In its simplest form, repentance is longing for God’s mercy. It begins with humility—with brutal honesty about our own guilt and our inability to earn forgiveness. Then, repentance clings to Christ in faith. We ask for mercy for this day’s sins because we know mercy is coming. Then, God justifies us personally. He doesn’t make excuses for our sins. He doesn’t say, “Well, they didn’t know any better. They live in a society that’s growing more and more anti-Christian every day. I’m just glad they’re trying hard.” God does something better. He comes to us in the gospel and declares us not guilty. He reminds us that he washed our sins away in Baptism. He gives us personally the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, so we know that in his courtroom, the finding in our file is not guilty.

No one who clings in faith to Jesus can say, “I thank you, God, that I’m not like other people.” True faith is humble: “I thank you, God, that you don’t give me what I deserve. I thank you, God, that you have had mercy on me. No one knows better than you how guilty I really am. But you declared me not guilty. You gave me love and forgiveness. For that I thank you, Lord.”

Irony is written all over the gospel. We will explore it more this year during Lent. But Jesus himself illustrated that irony when he spoke this parable. God cares about your heart. God cares about your faith. No matter how sinful you have been, you will live with him in heaven. Trust him. Admit your guilt to him and cling to his mercy in Christ. Go home today justified—declared not guilty. Amen.