

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Her comment surprised me. I had come to bring her communion when she was sick. I began with the confession of sins. I am in the habit of reading the confession and then speaking these words: “If this is your confession say, ‘Amen.’” Until that day everyone had. But that day she objected to the line, “we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” “That is not true,” she said, “I have loved my neighbors as myself.”

I do not remember how I responded - that could be because my response was not memorable. Each week here we read a confession of sins together – I pronounce the forgiveness of God to all who are gathered. I wonder how many times people are thinking what that woman was thinking. Or not thinking about their sins at all. I wonder if your confessing your sins to God makes any sense to you.

I have noticed that at funerals I often hear the comment, “She is with God now because she was a good person.” I do not think I have ever heard the comment, “He was a miserable sinner but I have hope for him because Jesus died for sinners.”

I have noticed when I ask someone if he or she keeps the Ten Commandments the answer is most always, “Yes”.

I notice how often I find myself dividing the world between the good people and the bad people as if there is really such a distinction. Maybe you do the same.

Jesus told the parable of two men praying in the temple. One began, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.” He was thankful that he was what I would call a good person. If he walked through that door as a visitor, I would welcome him, learn his name, hope that he would join. I would introduce him to you – I would be delighted to call him a brother in Christ. And every week he would hear that Christ died for our sins and I would declare to him, “By the authority of Christ I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins.” And I would hope that he would believe with all his heart that was true.

But in the story Jesus told, this good person who thanked God for his goodness did not go home that day right with God. Justified.

No, the other man, the one who said nothing but these words, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” went home right with God, justified.

Now maybe if this second one cleaned up his act – straightened out his life I would welcome him at the door, but what if he did not? What if all that he ever had to say for himself was, “God be merciful to me a sinner?” Week after week the same sins, the same confession, would he still go home right with God?

I know this, I would rather have a congregation of people who live moral lives and who give ten percent each week than a congregation of miserable sinners. But this parable makes it seem that Jesus does not see things the way I do.

Should that first man have been praying the same prayer as the second – “be merciful to me a sinner?” Is that what makes Jesus happy? Or was the problem with the first one that he judged himself in comparison with others. That is what happens at funerals when grandpa is in heaven because he was a good man. The grandchildren are thinking that God sees things as they do – comparing people to one another. I think that is how the woman who objected to confessing that she did not love her neighbor as herself was thinking.

But what happens if God is not comparing us to one another. What if God only compares us to Jesus? What if the standard is loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength in thought word and deed – loving God with your whole being every day all the time? And loving every person that your life could possibly touch with the kind of love Jesus has in giving himself on the cross? What if that is the only comparison that matters for you? For me? Well, compared to Jesus I do not measure up. If that is the only comparison that matters then I will be crying out to God for mercy every day.

Here is the surprise – through faith Jesus gives you everything that he is – everything that he has. Every weakness and failing and sin and shame Jesus takes from you and gives you in exchange all his goodness and love and obedience.

Believe it with all your heart, believe that God looks on you and sees God's beloved child. You are right with God through Jesus.

What will happen next? Whatever Jesus living in you is able to do.

The Apostle Paul wrote this: If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, the old has passed away, everything has become new.

You are a new creation in Christ. I can hardly wait to see what God is going to do in you. Amen.